Historical Romances

UNDER THE RED ROBE
COUNT HANNIBAL
A GENTLEMAN OF FRANCE

By STANLEY J. WEYMAN



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HISTORICAL ROMANCES



UNDER THE RED ROBE

COUNT HANNIBAL

A GENTLEMAN OF FRANCE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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THE *LIVELY PEGGY*

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Under The Red Robe
Count Hannibal
A Gentleman of France

BY

STANLEY J. WEYMAN

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HISTORICAL ROMANCES
UNDER THE RED ROBE • COUNT HANNIBAL
A GENTLEMAN OF FRANCE

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UNDER THE RED ROBE.

CHAPTER I.

AT ZATON'S.

"MARKED cards!"

There were a score round us when the fool, little knowing the man with whom he had to deal, and as little how to lose like a gentleman, flung the words in my teeth. He thought, I'll be sworn, that I should storm and swear and ruffle it like any common cock of the hackle. But that was never Gil de Berault's way. For a few seconds after he had spoken I did not even look at him. I passed my eye instead — smiling, *bien entendu* — round the ring of waiting faces, saw that there was no one except De Pombal I had cause to fear; and then at last I rose and looked at the fool with the grim face I have known impose on older and wiser men.

"Marked cards, M. l'Anglais?" I said, with a chilling sneer. "They are used, I am told, to trap players — not unbirched schoolboys."

"Yet I say that they are marked!" he replied hotly, in his queer foreign jargon. "In my last hand I had nothing. You doubled the stakes. Bah, Sir, you knew! You have swindled me!"

"Monsieur is easy to swindle — when he plays with a mirror behind him," I answered tartly. And at that there was a great roar of laughter, which might have been heard in the street, and which brought to the table every one in the eating-house whom his violence had not already attracted. But I did not relax my face. I waited until all was quiet again, and then waving aside two or three who stood between us and the entrance, I pointed gravely to the door. "There is a little space behind the church of St. Jacques, M. l'Etranger," I said, putting on my hat and taking my cloak on my arm. "Doubtless you will accompany me thither?"

He snatched up his hat, his face burning with shame and rage. "With pleasure!" he blurted out. "To the devil, if you like!"

I thought the matter arranged, when the Marquis laid his hand on the young fellow's arm and checked him. "This must not be," he said, turning from him to me with his grand fine-gentleman's air. "You know me, M. de Berault. This matter has gone far enough."

"Too far, M. de Pombal!" I answered bitterly. "Still, if you wish to take the gentleman's place, I shall raise no objection."

"Chut, man!" he retorted, shrugging his shoulders negligently. "I know you, and I do not fight with men of your stamp. Nor need this gentleman."

"Undoubtedly," I replied, bowing low, "if he prefers to be caned in the streets."

That stung the Marquis. "Have a care! have a care!" he cried hotly. "You go too far, M. Berault."

"De Berault, if you please," I objected, eyeing him sternly. "My family has borne the *de* as long as yours, M. de Pombal."

He could not deny that, and he answered, "As you please"; at the same time restraining his friend by a gesture. "But none the less, take my

advice," he continued. "The Cardinal has forbidden duelling, and this time he means it! You have been in trouble once and gone free. A second time it may fare worse with you. Let this gentleman go, therefore, M. de Berault. Besides — why, shame upon you, man!" he exclaimed hotly; "he is but a lad!"

Two or three who stood behind me applauded that. But I turned and they met my eye; and they were as mum as mice. "His age is his own concern," I said grimly. "He was old enough a while ago to insult me."

"And I will prove my words!" the lad cried, exploding at last. He had spirit enough, and the Marquis had had hard work to restrain him so long. "You do me no service, M. de Pombal," he continued, pettishly shaking off his friend's hand. "By your leave, this gentleman and I will settle this matter."

"That is better," I said, nodding drily, while the Marquis stood aside, frowning and baffled. "Permit me to lead the way."

Zaton's eating-house stands scarcely a hundred paces from St. Jacques la Boucherie, and half the

company went thither with us. The evening was wet, the light in the streets was waning, the streets themselves were dirty and slippery. There were few passers in the Rue St. Antoine; and our party, which earlier in the day must have attracted notice and a crowd, crossed unmarked, and entered without interruption the paved triangle which lies immediately behind the church. I saw in the distance one of the Cardinal's guard loitering in front of the scaffolding round the new Hôtel Richelieu; and the sight of the uniform gave me pause for a moment. But it was too late to repent.

The Englishman began at once to strip off his clothes. I closed mine to the throat, for the air was chilly. At that moment, while we stood preparing and most of the company seemed a little inclined to stand off from me, I felt a hand on my arm, and, turning, saw the dwarfish tailor at whose house in the Rue Savonnerie I lodged at the time. The fellow's presence was unwelcome, to say the least of it; and though for want of better company I had sometimes encouraged him to be free with me at home, I took that to be no

reason why I should be plagued with him before gentlemen. I shook him off, therefore, hoping by a frown to silence him.

He was not to be so easily put down, however. And perforce I had to speak to him. "Afterwards, afterwards," I said. "I am engaged now."

"For God's sake, don't, Sir!" was the poor fool's answer. "Don't do it! You will bring a curse on the house. He is but a lad, and—"

"You, too!" I exclaimed, losing patience. "Be silent, you scum! What do you know about gentlemen's quarrels? Leave me; do you hear?"

"But the Cardinal!" he cried in a quavering voice. "The Cardinal, M. de Berault? The last man you killed is not forgotten yet. This time he will be sure to—"

"Do you hear?" I hissed. The fellow's impudence passed all bounds. It was as bad as his croaking. "Begone!" I said. "I suppose you are afraid he will kill me, and you will lose your money?"

Frison fell back at that almost as if I had struck him, and I turned to my adversary, who had been awaiting my motions with impatience. God knows he did look young; as he stood with his

head bare and his fair hair drooping over his smooth woman's forehead — a mere lad fresh from the College of Burgundy, if they have such a thing in England. I felt a sudden chill as I looked at him: a qualm, a tremor, a presentiment. What was it the little tailor had said? That I should — but there, he did not know. What did he know of such things? If I let this pass I must kill a man a day, or leave Paris and the eating-house, and starve.

"A thousand pardons," I said gravely, as I drew and took my place. "A dun. I am sorry that the poor devil caught me so inopportunely. Now, however, I am at your service."

He saluted, and we crossed swords and began. But from the first I had no doubt what the result would be. The slippery stones and fading light gave him, it is true, some chance, some advantage, more than he deserved; but I had no sooner felt his blade than I knew that he was no swordsman. Possibly he had taken half-a-dozen lessons in rapier art, and practised what he learned with an Englishman as heavy and awkward as himself. But that was all. He made a few wild, clumsy rushes,

parrying widely. When I had foiled these, the danger was over, and I held him at my mercy.

I played with him a little while, watching the sweat gather on his brow, and the shadow of the church-tower fall deeper and darker, like the shadow of doom, on his face. Not out of cruelty — God knows I have never erred in that direction! — but because, for the first time in my life, I felt a strange reluctance to strike the blow. The curls clung to his forehead; his breath came and went in gasps; I heard the men behind me murmur, and one or two of them drop an oath; and then I slipped — slipped, and was down in a moment on my right side, my elbow striking the pavement so sharply that the arm grew numb to the wrist.

He held off! I heard a dozen voices cry, "Now! now you have him!" But he held off. He stood back and waited with his breast heaving and his point lowered, until I had risen and stood again on my guard.

"Enough! enough!" a rough voice behind me cried. "Don't hurt the man after that."

"On guard, Sir!" I answered coldly — for he

seemed to waver. "It was an accident. It shall not avail you again."

Several voices cried "Shame!" and one, "You coward!" But the Englishman stepped forward, a fixed look in his blue eyes. He took his place without a word. I read in his drawn white face that he had made up his mind to the worst, and his courage won my admiration. I would gladly and thankfully have set one of the lookers-on — any of the lookers-on — in his place; but that could not be. So I thought of Zaton's closed to me, of Pombal's insult, of the sneers and slights I had long kept at the sword's point; and, pressing him suddenly in a heat of affected anger, I thrust strongly over his guard, which had grown feeble, and ran him through the chest.

When I saw him lying, laid out on the stones with his eyes half shut, and his face glimmering white in the dusk — not that I saw him thus long, for there were a dozen kneeling round him in a twinkling — I felt an unwonted pang. It passed, however, in a moment. For I found myself confronted by a ring of angry faces — of men who, keeping at a distance, hissed and threatened me.

They were mostly canaille, who had gathered during the fight, and had viewed all that passed from the farther side of the railings. While some snarled and raged at me like wolves, calling me "Butcher!" and "Cut-throat!" and the like, or cried out that Berault was at his trade again, others threatened me with the vengeance of the Cardinal, flung the edict in my teeth, and said with glee that the guard were coming — they would see me hanged yet.

"His blood is on your head!" one cried furiously. "He will be dead in an hour. And you will swing for him! Hurrah!"

"Begone to your kennel!" I answered, with a look which sent him a yard backwards, though the railings were between us. And I wiped my blade carefully, standing a little apart. For — well, I could understand it — it was one of those moments when a man is not popular. Those who had come with me from the eating-house eyed me askance, and turned their backs when I drew nearer; and those who had joined us and obtained admission were scarcely more polite.

But I was not to be outdone in *sangfroid.*

I cocked my hat, and drawing my cloak over my shoulders, went out with a swagger which drove the curs from the gate before I came within a dozen paces of it. The rascals outside fell back as quickly, and in a moment I was in the street. Another moment and I should have been clear of the place and free to lie by for a while, when a sudden scurry took place round me. The crowd fled every way into the gloom, and in a hand-turn a dozen of the Cardinal's guard closed round me.

I had some acquaintance with the officer in command, and he saluted me civilly. "This is a bad business, M. de Berault," he said. "The man is dead they tell me."

"Neither dying nor dead," I answered lightly. "If that be all, you may go home again."

"With you," he replied, with a grin, "certainly. And as it rains, the sooner the better. I must ask you for your sword, I am afraid."

"Take it," I said, with the philosophy which never deserts me. "But the man will not die."

"I hope that may avail you," he answered in a tone I did not like. "Left wheel, my friends! To the Châtelet! March!"

"There are worse places," I said, and resigned myself to fate. After all, I had been in prison before, and learned that only one jail lets no prisoner escape.

But when I found that my friend's orders were to hand me over to the watch, and that I was to be confined like any common jail-bird caught cutting a purse or slitting a throat, I confess my heart sank. If I could get speech with the Cardinal, all would probably be well; but if I failed in this, or if the case came before him in strange guise, or he were in a hard mood himself, then it might go ill with me. The edict said, death!

And the lieutenant at the Châtelet did not put himself to much trouble to hearten me. "What! again, M. de Berault?" he said, raising his eyebrows as he received me at the gate, and recognized me by the light of the brazier which his men were just kindling outside. "You are a very bold man, Sir, or a very foolhardy one, to come here again. The old business, I suppose?"

"Yes, but he is not dead," I answered coolly.

"He has a trifle — a mere scratch. It was behind the church of St. Jacques."

"He looked dead enough," my friend the guardsman interposed. He had not yet gone.

"Bah!" I answered scornfully. "Have you ever known me make a mistake? When I kill a man, I kill him. I put myself to pains, I tell you, not to kill this Englishman. Therefore he will live."

"I hope so," the lieutenant said, with a dry smile. "And you had better hope so, too, M. de Berault. For if not —"

"Well?" I said, somewhat troubled. "If not, what, my friend?"

"I fear he will be the last man you will fight," he answered. "And even if he lives, I would not be too sure, my friend. This time the Cardinal is determined to put it down."

"He and I are old friends," I said confidently.

"So I have heard," he answered, with a short laugh. "I think the same was said of Chalais. I do not remember that it saved his head."

This was not reassuring. But worse was to come. Early in the morning orders were received that I should be treated with especial strictness,

and I was given the choice between irons and one of the cells below the level. Choosing the latter, I was left to reflect upon many things; among others, on the queer and uncertain nature of the Cardinal, who loved, I knew, to play with a man as a cat with a mouse; and on the ill effects which sometimes attend a high chest-thrust, however carefully delivered. I only rescued myself at last from these and other unpleasant reflections by obtaining the loan of a pair of dice; and the light being just enough to enable me to reckon the throws, I amused myself for hours by casting them on certain principles of my own. But a long run again and again upset my calculations; and at last brought me to the conclusion that a run of bad luck may be so persistent as to see out the most sagacious player. This was not a reflection very welcome to me at the moment.

Nevertheless, for three days it was all the company I had. At the end of that time the knave of a jailer who attended me, and who had never grown tired of telling me, after the fashion of his kind, that I should be hanged, came to me with a less assured air. "Perhaps you would like a little water?" he said civilly.

"Why, rascal?" I asked.

"To wash with," he answered.

"I asked for some yesterday, and you would not bring it," I grumbled. "However, better late than never. Bring it now. If I must hang, I will hang like a gentleman. But, depend upon it, the Cardinal will not serve an old friend so scurvy a trick."

"You are to go to him," he answered, when he came back with the water.

"What? To the Cardinal?" I cried.

"Yes," he answered.

"Good!" I exclaimed; and in my joy I sprang up at once, and began to refresh my dress. "So all this time I have been doing him an injustice. *Vive Monseigneur!* I might have known it."

"Don't make too sure!" the man answered spitefully. Then he went on: "I have something else for you. A friend of yours left it at the gate," he added. And he handed me a packet.

"Quite so!" I said, reading his rascally face aright. "And you kept it as long as you dared — as long as you thought I should hang, you

knave! Was not that so? But there, do not lie to me. Tell me instead which of my friends left it." For, to confess the truth, I had not so many friends at this time; and ten good crowns — the packet contained no less a sum — argued a pretty staunch friend, and one of whom a man might be proud.

The knave sniggered maliciously. "A crooked, dwarfish man left it," he said. "I doubt I might call him a tailor and not be far out."

"Chut!" I answered; but I was a little out of countenance. "I understand. An honest fellow enough, and in debt to me! I am glad he remembered. But when am I to go, friend?"

"In an hour," he answered sullenly. Doubtless he had looked to get one of the crowns; but I was too old a hand for that. If I came back I could buy his services; and if I did not I should have wasted my money.

Nevertheless, a little later, when I found myself on my way to the Hôtel Richelieu under so close a guard that I could see nothing except the figures that immediately surrounded me, I wished I had given him the money. At such

times, when all hangs in the balance and the sky is overcast, the mind runs on luck and old superstitions, and is prone to think a crown given here may avail there — though *there* be a hundred leagues away.

The Palais Richelieu was at this time in building, and we were required to wait in a long, bare gallery, where the masons were at work. I was kept a full hour here, pondering uncomfortably on the strange whims and fancies of the great man who then ruled France as the King's Lieutenant-General, with all the King's powers; and whose life I had once been the means of saving by a little timely information. On occasion he had done something to wipe out the debt; and at other times he had permitted me to be free with him. We were not unknown to one another, therefore.

Nevertheless, when the doors were at last thrown open, and I was led into his presence, my confidence underwent a shock. His cold glance, that, roving over me, regarded me not as a man but an item, the steely glitter of his southern eyes, chilled me to the bone. The room was bare, the

floor without carpet or covering. Some of the woodwork lay about, unfinished and in pieces. But the man — this man, needed no surroundings. His keen, pale face, his brilliant eyes, even his presence — though he was of no great height and began already to stoop at the shoulders — were enough to awe the boldest. I recalled as I looked at him a hundred tales of his iron will, his cold heart, his unerring craft. He had humbled the King's brother, the splendid Duke of Orleans, in the dust. He had curbed the Queen-mother. A dozen heads, the noblest in France, had come to the block through him. Only two years before he had quelled Rochelle; only a few months before he had crushed the great insurrection in Languedoc: and though the south, stripped of its old privileges, still seethed with discontent, no one in this year 1630 dared lift a hand against him — openly, at any rate. Under the surface a hundred plots, a thousand intrigues, sought his life or his power; but these, I suppose, are the hap of every great man.

No wonder, then, that the courage on which I plumed myself sank low at sight of him; or that

it was as much as I could do to mingle with the humility of my salute some touch of the *sangfroid* of old acquaintanceship.

And perhaps that had been better left out. For this man was without bowels. For a moment, while he stood looking at me and before he spoke to me, I gave myself up for lost. There was a glint of cruel satisfaction in his eyes that warned me, before he spoke, what he was going to say to me.

"I could not have made a better catch, M. de Berault," he said, smiling villainously, while he gently smoothed the fur of a cat that had sprung on the table beside him. "An old offender and an excellent example. I doubt it will not stop with you. But later, we will make you the warrant for flying at higher game."

"Monseigneur has handled a sword himself," I blurted out. The very room seemed to be growing darker, the air colder. I was never nearer fear in my life.

"Yes?" he said, smiling delicately. "And so?"

"Will not be too hard on the failings of a poor gentleman."

"He shall suffer no more than a rich one," he replied suavely, as he stroked the cat. "Enjoy that satisfaction, M. de Berault. Is that all?"

"Once I was of service to your Eminence," I said desperately.

"Payment has been made," he answered, "more than once. But for that I should not have seen you, M. de Berault."

"The King's face!" I cried, snatching at the straw he seemed to hold out.

He laughed cynically, smoothly. His thin face, his dark moustache, and whitening hair, gave him an air of indescribable keenness. "I am not the King," he said. "Besides, I am told you have killed as many as six men in duels. You owe the King, therefore, one life at least. You must pay it. There is no more to be said, M. de Berault," he continued coldly, turning away and beginning to collect some papers. "The law must take its course."

I thought he was about to nod to the lieutenant to withdraw me, and a chilling sweat broke out down my back. I saw the scaffold, I felt the cords. A moment, and it would be too late! "I

have a favour to ask," I stammered desperately, "if your Eminence would give me a moment alone."

"To what end?" he answered, turning and eyeing me with cold disfavour. "I know you — your past — all. It can do no good, my friend."

"Nor harm!" I cried. "And I am a dying man, Monseigneur!"

"That is true," he said thoughtfully. Still he seemed to hesitate; and my heart beat fast. At last he looked at the lieutenant. "You may leave us," he said shortly. "Now," when the officer had withdrawn and left us alone, "what is it? Say what you have to say quickly. And above all, do not try to fool me, M. de Berault."

But his piercing eyes so disconcerted me that now I had my chance I could not find a word to say, and stood before him mute. I think this pleased him, for his face relaxed.

"Well?" he said at last. "Is that all?"

"The man is not dead," I muttered.

He shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. "What of that?" he said. "That was not what you wanted to say to me."

"Once I saved your Eminence's life," I faltered miserably.

"Admitted," he answered, in his thin, incisive voice. "You mentioned the fact before. On the other hand, you have taken six to my knowledge, M. de Berault. You have lived the life of a bully, a common bravo, a gamester. You, a man of family! For shame! And it has brought you to this. Yet on that one point I am willing to hear more," he added abruptly.

"I might save your Eminence's life again," I cried. It was a sudden inspiration.

"You know something," he said quickly, fixing me with his eyes. "But no," he continued, shaking his head gently. "Pshaw! the trick is old. I have better spies than you, M. de Berault."

"But no better sword," I cried hoarsely. "No, not in all your guard!"

"That is true," he said. "That is true." To my surprise, he spoke in a tone of consideration; and he looked down at the floor. "Let me think, my friend," he continued.

He walked two or three times up and down the room, while I stood trembling. I confess it,

trembling. The man whose pulses danger has no power to quicken, is seldom proof against suspense; and the sudden hope his words awakened in me so shook me that his figure, as he trod lightly to and fro, with the cat rubbing against his robe and turning time for time with him, wavered before my eyes. I grasped the table to steady myself. I had not admitted even in my own mind how darkly the shadow of Montfaucon and the gallows had fallen across me.

I had leisure to recover myself, for it was some time before he spoke. When he did, it was in a voice harsh, changed, imperative. "You have the reputation of a man faithful, at least, to his employer," he said. "Do not answer me. I say it is so. Well, I will trust you. I will give you one more chance — though it is a desperate one. Woe to you if you fail me! Do you know Cocheforêt in Béarn? It is not far from Auch."

"No, your Eminence."

"Nor M. de Cocheforêt?"

"No, your Eminence."

"So much the better," he retorted. "But you

have heard of him. He has been engaged in every Gascon plot since the late King's death, and gave me more trouble last year in the Vivarais than any man twice his years. At present he is at Bosost in Spain, with other refugees, but I have learned that at frequent intervals he visits his wife at Cocheforêt, which is six leagues within the border. On one of these visits he must be arrested."

"That should be easy," I said.

The Cardinal looked at me. "Tush, man! what do you know about it?" he answered bluntly. "It is whispered at Cocheforêt if a soldier crosses the street at Auch. In the house are only two or three servants, but they have the country-side with them to a man, and they are a dangerous breed. A spark might kindle a fresh rising. The arrest, therefore, must be made secretly."

I bowed.

"One resolute man inside the house, with the help of two or three servants whom he could summon to his aid at will, might effect it," the Cardinal continued, glancing at a paper which lay

on the table. "The question is, will you be the man, my friend?"

I hesitated; then I bowed. What choice had I?

"Nay, nay, speak out!" he said sharply. "Yes or no, M. de Berault?"

"Yes, your Eminence," I said reluctantly. Again, I say, what choice had I?

"You will bring him to Paris, and alive. He knows things, and that is why I want him. You understand?"

"I understand, Monseigneur," I answered.

"You will get into the house as you can," he continued. "For that you will need strategy, and good strategy. They suspect everybody. You must deceive them. If you fail to deceive them, or, deceiving them, are found out later, M. de Berault — I do not think you will trouble me again, or break the edict a second time. On the other hand, should you deceive *me*" — he smiled still more subtly, but his voice sank to a purring note — "I will break you on the wheel like the ruined gamester you are!"

I met his look without quailing. "So be it!"

I said recklessly. "If I do not bring M. de Cocheforêt to Paris, you may do that to me, and more also!"

"It is a bargain!" he answered slowly. "I think you will be faithful. For money, here are a hundred crowns. That sum should suffice; but if you succeed you shall have twice as much more. Well, that is all, I think. You understand?"

"Yes, Monseigneur."

"Then why do you wait?"

"The lieutenant?" I said modestly.

Monseigneur laughed to himself, and sitting down wrote a word or two on a slip of paper. "Give him that," he said, in high good-humour. "I fear, M. de Berault, you will never get your deserts — in this world!"

CHAPTER II.

AT THE GREEN PILLAR.

COCHEFORÊT lies in a billowy land of oak and beech and chestnut — a land of deep, leafy bottoms, and hills clothed with forest. Ridge and valley, glen and knoll, the woodland, sparsely peopled and more sparsely tilled, stretches away to the great snow mountains that here limit France. It swarms with game — with wolves and bears, deer and boars. To the end of his life I have heard that the great King loved this district, and would sigh, when years and State fell heavily on him, for the beech-groves and box-covered hills of South Béarn. From the terraced steps of Auch you can see the forest roll away in light and shadow, vale and upland, to the base of the snow-peaks; and, though I come from Brittany and love the smell of the salt wind, I have seen few sights that outdo this.

It was the second week in October when I came to Cocheforêt, and, dropping down from the last wooded brow, rode quietly into the place at evening. I was alone, and had ridden all day in a glory of ruddy beech-leaves, through the silence of forest roads, across clear brooks and glades still green. I had seen more of the quiet and peace of the country than had been my share since boyhood, and I felt a little melancholy; it might be for that reason, or because I had no great taste for the task before me — the task now so imminent. In good faith, it was not a gentleman's work, look at it how you might.

But beggars must not be choosers, and I knew that this feeling would pass away. At the inn, in the presence of others, under the spur of necessity, or in the excitement of the chase, were that once begun, I should lose the feeling. When a man is young, he seeks solitude: when he is middle-aged he flies it and his thoughts. I made without ado for the Green Pillar, a little inn in the village street, to which I had been directed at Auch, and, thundering on the door

with the knob of my riding-switch, railed at the man for keeping me waiting.

Here and there at hovel doors in the street — which was a mean, poor place, not worthy of the name — men and women looked out at me suspiciously. But I affected to ignore them; and at last the host came. He was a fair-haired man, half Basque, half Frenchman, and had scanned me well, I was sure, through some window or peephole; for, when he came out, he betrayed no surprise at the sight of a well-dressed stranger — a portent in that out-of-the-way village — but eyed me with a kind of sullen reserve.

"I can lie here to-night, I suppose?" I said, dropping the reins on the sorrel's neck. The horse hung its head.

"I don't know," he answered stupidly.

I pointed to the green bough which topped a post that stood opposite the door.

"This is an inn, is it not?" I said.

"Yes," he answered slowly; "it is an inn. But —"

"But you are full, or you are out of food, or

your wife is ill, or something else is amiss," I answered peevishly. "All the same, I am going to lie here. So you must make the best of it, and your wife, too — if you have one."

He scratched his head, looking at me with an ugly glitter in his eyes. But he said nothing, and I dismounted.

"Where can I stable my horse?" I asked.

"I'll put it up," he answered sullenly, stepping forward and taking the reins in his hands.

"Very well," I said; "but I go with you. A merciful man is merciful to his beast, and wherever I go I see my horse fed."

"It will be fed," he said shortly. And then he waited for me to go into the house. "The wife is in there," he continued, looking at me stubbornly.

"*Imprimis* — if you understand Latin, my friend," I answered, "the horse in the stall."

As if he saw it was no good, he turned the sorrel slowly round, and began to lead it across the village street. There was a shed behind the inn, which I had already marked and taken for the stable, and I was surprised when I found

he was not going there. But I made no remark, and in a few minutes saw the horse well stabled in a hovel which seemed to belong to a neighbour.

This done, the man led the way back to the inn, carrying my valise.

"You have no other guests?" I said, with a casual air. I knew he was watching me closely.

"No," he answered.

"This is not much in the way to anywhere, I suppose?"

"No."

That was evident; a more retired place I never saw. The hanging woods, rising steeply to a great height, so shut the valley in that I was puzzled to think how a man could leave it save by the road I had come. The cottages, which were no more than mean, small huts, ran in a straggling double line, with many gaps — through fallen trees and ill-cleared meadows. Among them a noisy brook ran in and out. And the inhabitants — charcoal-burners, or swineherds, or poor people of the like class, were no better than their dwellings. I looked in vain for the Château. It was not to be seen, and I dared not ask for it.

The man led me into the common room of the tavern — a low-roofed, poor place, lacking a chimney or glazed windows, and grimy with smoke and use. The fire — a great half-burned tree — smouldered on a stone hearth, raised a foot from the floor. A huge black pot simmered over it, and beside one window lounged a country fellow talking with the goodwife. In the dusk I could not see his face, but I gave the woman a word, and sat down to wait for my supper.

She seemed more silent than the common run of women; but this might be because her husband was present. While she moved about, getting my meal, he took his place against the doorpost and fell to staring at me so persistently that I felt by no means at my ease. He was a tall, strong fellow, with a rough moustache and brown beard, cut in the mode Henri Quatre; and on the subject of that king — a safe one, I knew, with a Béarnais — and on that alone, I found it possible to make him talk. Even then there was a suspicious gleam in his eyes that bade me abstain from questions; and as the darkness deepened behind him, and the firelight played more and more

strongly on his features, and I thought of the leagues of woodland that lay between this remote valley and Auch, I recalled the Cardinal's warning that if I failed in my attempt I should be little likely to trouble Paris again.

The lout by the window paid no attention to me; nor I to him, when I had once satisfied myself that he was really what he seemed to be. But by and by two or three men — rough, uncouth fellows — dropped in to reinforce the landlord, and they, too, seemed to have no other business than to sit in silence looking at me, or now and again to exchange a word in a *patois* of their own. By the time my supper was ready, the knaves numbered six in all; and, as they were armed to a man with huge Spanish knives, and evidently resented my presence in their dull rustic fashion — every rustic is suspicious — I began to think that, unwittingly, I had put my head into a wasp's nest.

Nevertheless, I ate and drank with apparent appetite; but little that passed within the circle of light cast by the smoky lamp escaped me. I watched the men's looks and gestures at least

as sharply as they watched mine; and all the time I was racking my wits for some mode of disarming their suspicions — or failing that, of learning something more of the position, which, it was clear, far exceeded in difficulty and danger anything I had expected. The whole valley, it would seem, was on the lookout to protect my man!

I had purposely brought with me from Auch a couple of bottles of choice Armagnac; and these had been carried into the house with my saddle-bags. I took one out now and opened it, and carelessly offered a dram of the spirit to the landlord. He took it. As he drank it, I saw his face flush; he handed back the cup reluctantly, and on that hint I offered him another. The strong spirit was already beginning to work. He accepted, and in a few minutes began to talk more freely and with less of the constraint which had marked us. Still, his tongue ran chiefly on questions — he would know this, he would learn that; but even this was a welcome change. I told him openly whence I had come, by what road, how long I had stayed in Auch, and where; and so far I satisfied his curiosity. Only when I

came to the subject of my visit to Cocheforêt I kept a mysterious silence, hinting darkly at business in Spain and friends across the border, and this and that, and giving the peasants to understand, if they pleased, that I was in the same interest as their exiled master.

They took the bait, winked at one another, and began to look at me in a more friendly way — the landlord foremost. But when I had led them so far, I dared go no farther, lest I should commit myself and be found out. I stopped, therefore, and, harking back to general subjects, chanced to compare my province with theirs. The landlord, now become almost talkative, was not slow to take up this challenge; and it presently led to my acquiring a curious piece of knowledge. He was boasting of his great snow mountains, the forests that propped them, the bears that roamed in them, the izards that loved the ice, and the boars that fed on the oak mast.

"Well," I said, quite by chance, "we have not these things, it is true. But we have things in the north you have not. We have tens of thousands of good horses — not such ponies as you

breed here. At the horse fair at Fécamp my sorrel would be lost in the crowd. Here in the south you will not meet his match in a long day's journey."

"Do not make too sure of that!" the man replied, his eyes bright with triumph and the dram. "What would you say if I showed you a better — in my own stable?"

I saw that his words sent a kind of thrill through his other hearers, and that such of them as understood — for two or three of them talked their *patois* only — looked at him angrily; and in a twinkling I began to comprehend. But I affected dulness, and laughed scornfully.

"Seeing is believing," I said. "I doubt if you know a good horse here when you see one, my friend."

"Oh, don't I?" he said, winking. "Indeed!"

"I doubt it," I answered stubbornly.

"Then come with me, and I will show you one," he retorted, discretion giving way to vainglory. His wife and the others, I saw, looked at him dumbfounded; but, without paying any heed to them, he took up a lanthorn, and, assum-

ing an air of peculiar wisdom, opened the door. "Come with me," he continued. "I don't know a good horse when I see one, don't I? I know a better than yours, at any rate!"

I should not have been surprised if the other men had interfered; but — I suppose he was a leader among them, and they did not, and in a moment we were outside. Three paces through the darkness took us to the stable, an offset at the back of the inn. My man twirled the pin, and, leading the way in, raised his lanthorn. A horse whinnied softly, and turned its bright, soft eyes on us — a baldfaced chestnut, with white hairs in its tail and one white stocking.

"There!" my guide exclaimed, waving the lanthorn to and fro boastfully, that I might see its points. "What do you say to that? Is that an undersized pony?"

"No," I answered, purposely stinting my praise. "It is pretty fair — for this country."

"Or any country," he answered wrathfully. "Any country, I say — I don't care where it is! And I have reason to know! Why, man, that horse is — But there, that is a good horse, if

ever you saw one!" And with that he ended abruptly and lamely, lowering the lanthorn with a sudden gesture, and turning to the door. He was on the instant in such hurry, that he almost shouldered me out.

But I understood. I knew that he had nearly betrayed all — that he had been on the point of blurting out that that was M. de Cocheforêt's horse! M. de Cocheforêt's, *comprenez bien!* And while I turned away my face in the darkness, that he might not see me smile, I was not surprised to find the man in a moment changed, and become, in the closing of the door, as sober and suspicious as before, ashamed of himself and enraged with me, and in a mood to cut my throat for a trifle.

It was not my cue to quarrel, however — anything but that. I made, therefore, as if I had seen nothing, and when we were back in the inn praised the horse grudgingly, and like a man but half convinced. The ugly looks and ugly weapons I saw around me were fine incentives to caution; and no Italian, I flatter myself, could have played his part more nicely than I did. But

I was heartily glad when it was over, and I found myself, at last, left alone for the night in a little garret — a mere fowl-house — upstairs, formed by the roof and gable walls, and hung with strings of apples and chestnuts. It was a poor sleeping-place — rough, chilly, and unclean. I ascended to it by a ladder; my cloak and a little fern formed my only bed. But I was glad to accept it. It enabled me to be alone and to think out the position unwatched.

Of course M. de Cocheforêt was at the Château. He had left his horse here, and gone up on foot: probably that was his usual plan. He was therefore within my reach, in one sense — I could not have come at a better time — but in another he was as much beyond it as if I were still in Paris. So far was I from being able to seize him that I dared not ask a question or let fall a rash word, or even look about me freely. I saw I dared not. The slightest hint of my mission, the faintest breath of distrust, would lead to throat-cutting — and the throat would be mine; while the longer I lay in the village, the greater suspicion I should incur, and the closer would be the watch kept over me.

In such a position some men might have given up the attempt and saved themselves across the border. But I have always valued myself on my fidelity, and I did not shrink. If not to-day, to-morrow; if not this time, next time. The dice do not always turn up aces. Bracing myself, therefore, to the occasion, I crept, as soon as the house was quiet, to the window, a small, square, open lattice, much cobwebbed, and partly stuffed with hay. I looked out. The village seemed to be asleep. The dark branches of trees hung a few feet away, and almost obscured a grey, cloudy sky, through which a wet moon sailed drearily. Looking downwards, I could at first see nothing; but as my eyes grew used to the darkness — I had only just put out my rushlight — I made out the stable-door and the shadowy outlines of the lean-to roof.

I had hoped for this. I could now keep watch, and learn at least whether Cocheforêt left before morning. If he did not I should know he was still here. If he did, I should be the better for seeing his features, and learning, perhaps, other things that might be of use.

Making up my mind to be uncomfortable, I sat down on the floor by the lattice, and began a vigil that might last, I knew, until morning. It did last about an hour. At the end of that time I heard whispering below, then footsteps; then, as some persons turned a corner, a voice speaking aloud and carelessly. I could not catch the words spoken; but the voice was a gentleman's, and its bold accents and masterful tone left me in no doubt that the speaker was M. de Cocheforêt himself. Hoping to learn more, I pressed my face nearer to the opening, and I had just made out through the gloom two figures — one that of a tall, slight man, wearing a cloak, the other, I thought, a woman's, in a sheeny white dress — when a thundering rap on the door of my garret made me spring back a yard from the lattice, and lie down hurriedly on my couch. The noise was repeated.

"Well?" I cried, cursing the untimely interruption. I was burning with anxiety to see more. "What is it? What is the matter?"

The trapdoor was lifted a foot or more. The landlord thrust up his head.

"You called, did you not?" he asked. He held up a rushlight, which illumined half the room and lit up his grinning face.

"Called — at this hour of the night, you fool?" I answered angrily. "No! I did not call. Go to bed, man!"

But he remained on the ladder, gaping stupidly.

"I heard you," he said.

"Go to bed! You are drunk!" I answered, sitting up. "I tell you I did not call."

"Oh, very well," he answered slowly. "And you do not want anything?"

"Nothing — except to be left alone!" I replied sourly.

"Umph!" he said. "Good-night!"

"Good-night! Good-night!" I answered, with what patience I might. The tramp of the horse's hoofs as it was led out of the stable was in my ear at the moment. "Good-night!" I continued feverishly, hoping he would still retire in time, and I have a chance to look out. "I want to sleep."

"Good," he said, with a broad grin. "But it is early yet, and you have plenty of time."

And then, at last, he slowly let down the trap-door, and I heard him chuckle as he went down the ladder.

Before he reached the bottom I was at the window. The woman whom I had seen still stood below, in the same place; and beside her a man in a peasant's dress, holding a lanthorn. But the man, the man I wanted to see was no longer there. And it was evident that he was gone; it was evident that the others no longer feared me, for while I gazed the landlord came out to them with another lanthorn, and said something to the lady, and she looked up at my window and laughed.

It was a warm night, and she wore nothing over her white dress. I could see her tall, shapely figure and shining eyes, and the firm contour of her beautiful face; which, if any fault might be found with it, erred in being too regular. She looked like a woman formed by nature to meet dangers and difficulties; and even here, at midnight, in the midst of these desperate men, she seemed in place. It was possible that under her queenly exterior, and behind the con-

temptuous laugh with which she heard the landlord's story, there lurked a woman's soul capable of folly and tenderness. But no outward sign betrayed its presence.

I scanned her very carefully; and secretly, if the truth be told, I was glad to find Madame de Cocheforêt such a woman. I was glad that she had laughed as she had — that she was not a little, tender, child-like woman, to be crushed by the first pinch of trouble. For if I succeeded in my task, if I — but, pish! Women, I said, were all alike. She would find consolation quickly enough.

I watched until the group broke up, and Madame, with one of the men, went her way round the corner of the inn, and out of my sight. Then I retired to bed again, feeling more than ever perplexed what course I should adopt. It was clear that, to succeed, I must obtain admission to the house. This was garrisoned, unless my instructions erred, by two or three old men-servants only, and as many women; since Madame, to disguise her husband's visits the more easily, lived, and gave out that she

lived, in great retirement. To seize her husband at home, therefore, might be no impossible task; though here, in the heart of the village, a troop of horse might make the attempt, and fail.

But how was I to gain admission to the house — a house guarded by quick-witted women, and hedged in with all the precautions love could devise? That was the question; and dawn found me still debating it, still as far as ever from an answer. With the first light I was glad to get up. I thought that the fresh air might inspire me, and I was tired, besides, of my stuffy closet. I crept stealthily down the ladder, and managed to pass unseen through the lower room, in which several persons were snoring heavily. The outer door was not fastened, and in a hand-turn I stood in the street.

It was still so early that the trees stood up black against the reddening sky, but the bough upon the post before the door was growing green, and in a few minutes the grey light would be everywhere. Already even in the roadway there was a glimmering of it; and as I

stood at the corner of the house — where I could command both the front and the side on which the stable opened — looking greedily for any trace of the midnight departure, my eyes detected something light-coloured lying on the ground. It was not more than two or three paces from me, and I stepped to it and picked it up curiously, hoping it might be a note. It was not a note, however, but a tiny orange-coloured sachet, such as women carry in the bosom. It was full of some faintly scented powder, and bore on one side the initial "E," worked in white silk; and was altogether a dainty little toy, such as women love.

Doubtless Madame de Cocheforêt had dropped it in the night. I turned it over and over; and then I put it away with a smile, thinking it might be useful some time, and in some way. I had scarcely done this, and turned with the intention of exploring the street, when the door behind me creaked on its leather hinges, and in a moment my host stood at my elbow.

Evidently his suspicions were again aroused, for from that time he managed to be with me,

on one pretence or another, until noon. Moreover, his manner grew each moment more churlish, his hints plainer; until I could scarcely avoid noticing the one or the other. About midday, having followed me for the twentieth time into the street, he came at last to the point, by asking me rudely if I did not need my horse.

"No," I said. "Why do you ask?"

"Because," he answered, with an ugly smile, "this is not a very healthy place for strangers."

"Ah!" I retorted. "But the border air suits me, you see."

It was a lucky answer; for, taken with my talk of the night before, it puzzled him, by again suggesting that I was on the losing side, and had my reasons for lying near Spain. Before he had done scratching his head over it, the clatter of hoofs broke the sleepy quiet of the village street, and the lady I had seen the night before rode quickly round the corner, and drew her horse on to its haunches. Without looking at me, she called to the innkeeper to come to her stirrup.

He went. The moment his back was turned,

I slipped away, and in a twinkling was hidden by a house. Two or three glum-looking fellows stared at me as I passed, but no one moved; and in two minutes I was clear of the village, and in a half-worn track which ran through the wood, and led — if my ideas were right — to the Château. To discover the house and learn all that was to be learned about its situation was my most pressing need: even at the risk of a knife-thrust, I was determined to satisfy it.

I had not gone two hundred paces along the path before I heard the tread of a horse behind me, and I had just time to hide myself before Madame came up and rode by me, sitting her horse gracefully, and with all the courage of a northern woman. I watched her pass, and then, assured by her presence that I was in the right road, I hurried after her. Two minutes' walking at speed brought me to a light wooden bridge spanning a stream. I crossed this, and, the wood opening, saw before me first a wide, pleasant meadow, and beyond this a terrace. On the terrace, pressed upon on three sides by thick woods, stood a grey mansion, with the corner tourelles.

steep, high roofs, and round balconies that men loved and built in the days of the first Francis.

It was of good size, but wore, I fancied, a gloomy aspect. A great yew hedge, which seemed to enclose a walk or bowling-green, hid the ground floor of the east wing from view, while a formal rose garden, stiff even in neglect, lay in front of the main building. The west wing, whose lower roofs fell gradually away to the woods, probably contained the stables and granaries.

I stood a moment only, but I marked all, and noted how the road reached the house, and which windows were open to attack; then I turned and hastened back. Fortunately, I met no one between the house and the village, and was able to enter the inn with an air of the most complete innocence.

Short as had been my absence, I found things altered there. Round the door loitered and chattered three strangers — stout, well-armed fellows, whose bearing suggested a curious mixture of smugness and independence. Half-a-dozen packhorses stood tethered to the post in front of the house; and the landlord's manner, from being

rude and churlish only, had grown perplexed and almost timid. One of the strangers, I soon found, supplied him with wine; the others were travelling merchants, who rode in the first one's company for the sake of safety. All were substantial men from Tarbes — solid burgesses; and I was not long in guessing that my host, fearing what might leak out before them, and particularly that I might refer to the previous night's disturbance, was on tenterhooks while they remained.

For a time this did not suggest anything to me. But when we had all taken our seats for supper there came an addition to the party. The door opened, and the fellow whom I had seen the night before with Madame de Cocheforêt entered, and took a stool by the fire. I felt sure that he was one of the servants at the Château; and in a flash his presence inspired me with the most feasible plan for obtaining admission which I had yet hit upon. I felt myself growing hot at the thought — it seemed so full of promise and of danger — and on the instant, without giving myself time to think too much, I began to carry it into effect.

I called for two or three bottles of better wine, and, assuming a jovial air, passed it round the table. When we had drunk a few glasses, I fell to talking, and, choosing politics, took the side of the Languedoc party and the malcontents, in so reckless a fashion that the innkeeper was beside himself at my imprudence. The merchants, who belonged to the class with whom the Cardinal was always most popular, looked first astonished and then enraged. But I was not to be checked. Hints and sour looks were lost upon me. I grew more outspoken with every glass, I drank to the Rochellois, I swore it would not be long before they raised their heads again; and at last, while the innkeeper and his wife were engaged lighting the lamp, I passed round the bottle and called on all for a toast.

"I'll give you one to begin," I bragged noisily. "A gentleman's toast! A southern toast! Here is confusion to the Cardinal, and a health to all who hate him!"

"Mon Dieu!" one of the strangers cried, springing from his seat in a rage. "I am not going to stomach that! Is your house a common

treason-hole," he continued, turning furiously on the landlord, "that you suffer this?"

"Hoity-toity!" I answered, coolly keeping my seat. "What is all this? Don't you relish my toast, little man?"

"No — nor you!" he retorted hotly, "whoever you may be!"

"Then I will give you another," I answered, with a hiccough. "Perhaps it will be more to your taste. Here is the Duke of Orleans, and may he soon be King!"

CHAPTER III.

THE HOUSE IN THE WOOD.

My words fairly startled the three men out of their anger. For a moment they glared at me as if they had seen a ghost. Then the wine-merchant clapped his hand on the table. "That is enough!" he said, with a look at his companions. "I think there can be no mistake about that. As damnable treason as ever I heard whispered! I congratulate you, Sir, on your boldness. As for you," he continued, turning with an ugly sneer to the landlord, "I shall know now the company you keep! I was not aware that my wine wet whistles to such a tune!"

But if he was startled, the innkeeper was furious, seeing his character thus taken away; and, being at no time a man of many words, he vented his rage exactly in the way I wished. In

a twinkling he raised such an uproar as can scarcely be conceived. With a roar like a bull's he ran headlong at the table, and overturned it on the top of me. The woman saved the lamp and fled with it into a corner, whence she and the man from the Château watched the skirmish in silence; but the pewter cups and platters flew spinning across the floor, while the table pinned me to the ground among the ruins of my stool. Having me at this disadvantage — for at first I made no resistance — the landlord began to belabour me with the first thing he snatched up, and when I tried to defend myself cursed me with each blow for a treacherous rogue and a vagrant. Meanwhile, the three merchants, delighted with the turn things had taken, skipped round us laughing; and now hounded him on, now bantered me with "How is that for the Duke of Orleans?" and "How now, traitor?"

When I thought this had lasted long enough — or, to speak more plainly, when I could stand the innkeeper's drubbing no longer — I threw him off by a great effort, and struggled to my feet. But still, though the blood was trickling

down my face, I refrained from drawing my sword. I caught up instead a leg of the stool which lay handy, and, watching my opportunity, dealt the landlord a shrewd blow under the ear, which laid him out in a moment on the wreck of his own table.

"Now!" I cried, brandishing my new weapon, which fitted the hand to a nicety, "come on! Come on, if you dare to strike a blow, you peddling, truckling, huckstering knaves! A fig for you and your shaveling Cardinal!"

The red-faced wine-merchant drew his sword in a one-two. "Why, you drunken fool," he said wrathfully, "put that stick down, or I will spit you like a lark!"

"Lark in your teeth!" I cried, staggering as if the wine were in my head. "Another word, and I—"

He made a couple of savage passes at me, but in a twinkling his sword flew across the room.

"*Voilà!*" I shouted, lurching forward, as if I had luck and not skill to thank for it. "Now the next! Come on, come on—you white-livered knaves!" And, pretending a drunken frenzy,

I flung my weapon bodily amongst them, and seizing the nearest, began to wrestle with him.

In a moment they all threw themselves upon me, and, swearing copiously, bore me back to the door. The wine-merchant cried breathlessly to the woman to open it, and in a twinkling they had me through it and half way across the road. The one thing I feared was a knife-thrust in the mêlée; but I had to run that risk, and the men were honest enough and, thinking me drunk, indulgent. In a trice I found myself on my back in the dirt, with my head humming; and heard the bars of the door fall noisily into their places.

I got up and went to the door, and, to play out my part, hammered on it frantically, crying out to them to let me in. But the three travellers only jeered at me, and the landlord, coming to the window, with his head bleeding, shook his fist at me and cursed me for a mischief-maker.

Baffled in this I retired to a log which lay in the road a few paces from the house, and sat down on it to await events. With torn

clothes and bleeding face, hatless and covered with dirt, I was in scarcely better case than my opponent. It was raining, too, and the dripping branches swayed over my head. The wind was in the south—the coldest quarter. I began to feel chilled and dispirited. If my scheme failed, I had forfeited roof and bed to no purpose, and placed future progress out of the question. It was a critical moment.

But at last that happened for which I had been looking. The door swung open a few inches, and a man came noiselessly out; the door was quickly barred behind him. He stood a moment, waiting on the threshold and peering into the gloom; and seemed to expect to be attacked. Finding himself unmolested, however, and all quiet, he went off steadily down the street —towards the Château.

I let a couple of minutes go by and then I followed. I had no difficulty in hitting on the track at the end of the street, but when I had once plunged into the wood, I found myself in darkness so intense that I soon strayed from the path, and fell over roots, and tore my

clothes with thorns, and lost my temper twenty times before I found the path again. However, I gained the bridge at last, and caught sight of a light twinkling before me. To make for it across the meadow and terrace was an easy task; yet when I had reached the door and had hammered upon it, I was in so sorry a plight that I sank down, and had no need to play a part or pretend to be worse than I was.

For a long time no one answered. The dark house towering above me remained silent. I could hear, mingled with the throbbings of my heart, the steady croaking of the frogs in a pond near the stables; but no other sound. In a frenzy of impatience and disgust I stood up again and hammered, kicking with my heels on the nail-studded door, and crying out desperately, "*A moi! A moi!*"

Then, or a moment later, I heard a remote door opened; footsteps as of more than one person drew near. I raised my voice and cried again, "*A moi!*"

"Who is there?" a voice asked.

"A gentleman in distress," I answered piteously,

moving my hands across the door. "For God's sake open and let me in. I am hurt, and dying of cold."

"What brings you here?" the voice asked sharply. Despite its tartness, I fancied it was a woman's.

"Heaven knows!" I answered desperately. "I cannot tell. They maltreated me at the inn, and threw me into the street. I crawled away, and have been wandering in the wood for hours. Then I saw a light here."

Thereon, some muttering took place on the other side of the door, to which I had my ear It ended in the bars being lowered. The door swung partly open and a light shone out, dazzling me. I tried to shade my eyes with my fingers, and as I did so fancied I heard a murmur of pity. But when I looked in under screen of my hand I saw only one person — the man who held the light, and his aspect was so strange, so terrifying, that, shaken as I was by fatigue, I recoiled a step.

He was a tall and very thin man, meanly dressed in a short scanty jacket and well-darned

hose. Unable, for some reason, to bend his neck, he carried his head with a strange stiffness.

And that head! Never did living man show a face so like death. His forehead was bald and white, his cheek-bones stood out under the strained skin, all the lower part of his face fell in, his jaws receded, his cheeks were hollow, his lips and chin were thin and fleshless. He seemed to have only one expression — a fixed grin.

While I stood looking at this formidable creature he made a quick motion to shut the door again, smiling more widely. I had the presence of mind to thrust in my foot, and, before he could resent the act, a voice in the background cried: "For shame, Clon! Stand back. Stand back, do you hear? I am afraid, Monsieur, that you are hurt."

The last words were my welcome to that house; and, spoken at an hour and in circumstances so gloomy, they made a lasting impression. Round the hall ran a gallery, and this, the height of the apartment, and the dark panelling seemed to swallow up the light. I stood within the entrance (as it seemed to me) of a huge cave; the skull-headed

porter had the air of an ogre. Only the voice which greeted me dispelled the illusion. I turned trembling towards the quarter whence it came, and, shading my eyes, made out a woman's form standing in a doorway under the gallery. A second figure, which I took to be that of the servant I had seen at the inn, loomed uncertainly beside her.

I bowed in silence. My teeth were chattering. I was faint without feigning, and felt a kind of terror, hard to explain, at the sound of this woman's voice.

"One of our people has told me about you," she continued, speaking out of the darkness. "I am sorry that this has happened to you here, but I am afraid that you were indiscreet."

"I take all the blame, Madame," I answered humbly. "I ask only shelter for the night."

"The time has not yet come when we cannot give our friends that!" she answered, with noble courtesy. "When it does, Monsieur, we shall be homeless ourselves."

I shivered, looking anywhere but at her; for I had not sufficiently pictured this scene of my

arrival — I had not foreseen its details; and now I took part in it I felt a miserable meanness weigh me down. I had never from the first liked the work! But, I had had no choice. And I had no choice now. Luckily, the guise in which I came, my fatigue, and wound were a sufficient mark, or I should have incurred suspicion at once. For I am sure that if ever in this world a brave man wore a hang-dog air, or Gil de Berault fell below himself, it was then and there — on Madame de Cocheforêt's threshold, with her welcome sounding in my ears.

One, I think, did suspect me. Clon, the porter, continued to hold the door obstinately ajar and to eye me with grinning spite, until his mistress, with some sharpness, bade him drop the bars, and conduct me to a room.

"Do you go also, Louis," she continued, speaking to the man beside her, "and see this gentleman comfortably disposed. I am sorry," she added, addressing me in the graceful tone she had before used, and I thought I could see her head bend in the darkness, "that our present circumstances do not permit us to welcome you more

fitly, Monsieur. But the troubles of the times — however, you will excuse what is lacking. Until to-morrow, I have the honour to bid you good-night."

"Good-night, Madame," I stammered, trembling. I had not been able to distinguish her face in the gloom of the doorway, but her voice, her greeting, her presence, unmanned me. I was troubled and perplexed; I had not spirit to kick a dog. I followed the two servants from the hall without heeding how we went; nor was it until we came to a full stop at a door in a whitewashed corridor, and it was forced upon me that something was in question between my two conductors, that I began to take notice.

Then I saw that one of them, Louis, wished to lodge me here where we stood. The porter, on the other hand, who held the keys, would not. He did not speak a word, nor did the other — and this gave a queer ominous character to the debate; but he continued to jerk his head towards the farther end of the corridor, and, at last, he carried his point. Louis shrugged his shoulders, and moved on, glancing askance at me; and I,

not understanding the matter in debate, followed the pair in silence.

We reached the end of the corridor, and there, for an instant, the monster with the keys paused and grinned at me. Then he turned into a narrow passage on the left, and after following it for some paces, halted before a small, strong door. His key jarred in the lock, but he forced it shrieking round, and with a savage flourish threw the door open.

I walked in and saw a mean, bare chamber with barred windows. The floor was indifferently clean, there was no furniture. The yellow light of the lanthorn falling on the stained walls gave the place the look of a dungeon. I turned to the two men. "This is not a very good room," I said. "And it feels damp. Have you no other?"

Louis looked doubtfully at his companion. But the porter shook his head stubbornly.

"Why does he not speak?" I asked with impatience.

"He is dumb," Louis answered.

"Dumb!" I exclaimed. "But he hears."

"He has ears," the servant answered drily. "But he has no tongue, Monsieur."

I shuddered. "How did he lose it?" I asked.

"At Rochelle. He was a spy, and the King's people took him the day the town surrendered. They spared his life, but cut out his tongue."

"Ah!" I said. I wished to say more, to be natural, to show myself at my ease. But the porter's eyes seemed to burn into me, and my own tongue clove to the roof of my mouth. He opened his lips and pointed to his throat with a horrid gesture, and I shook my head and turned from him — "You can let me have some bedding?" I murmured hastily, for the sake of saying something, and to escape.

"Of course, Monsieur," Louis answered. "I will fetch some."

He went away, thinking doubtless that Clon would stay with me. But after waiting a minute the porter strode off also with the lanthorn, leaving me to stand in the middle of the damp, dark room, and reflect on the position. It was plain that Clon suspected me. This prison-like room, with its barred window at the back of the house, and in the wing farthest from the stables, proved so much. Clearly, he was a dangerous

fellow, of whom I must beware. I had just begun to wonder how Madame could keep such a monster in her house, when I heard his step returning. He came in, lighting Louis, who carried a small pallet and a bundle of coverings.

The dumb man had, besides the lanthorn, a bowl of water and a piece of rag in his hand. He set them down, and going out again, fetched in a stool. Then he hung up the lanthorn on a nail, took the bowl and rag, and invited me to sit down.

I was loth to let him touch me; but he continued to stand over me, pointing and grinning with dark persistence, and, rather than stand on a trifle, I sat down at last, and gave him his way. He bathed my head carefully enough, and I dare say did it good; but I understood. I knew that his only desire was to learn whether the cut was real or a pretence. I began to fear him more and more, and, until he was gone from the room, dared scarcely lift my face, lest he should read too much in it.

Alone, even, I felt uncomfortable. This seemed so sinister a business, and so ill begun. I was

in the house. But Madame's frank voice haunted me, and the dumb man's eyes, full of suspicion and menace. When I presently got up and tried my door, I found it locked. The room smelled dank and close — like a vault. I could not see through the barred window; but I could hear the boughs sweep it in ghostly fashion; and I guessed that it looked out where the wood grew close to the walls of the house; and that even in the day the sun never peeped through it.

Nevertheless, tired and worn out, I slept at last. When I awoke the room was full of grey light, the door stood open, and Louis, looking ashamed of himself, waited by my pallet with a cup of wine in his hand, and some bread and fruit on a platter.

"Will Monsieur be good enough to rise?" he said. "It is eight o'clock."

"Willingly," I answered tartly. "Now that the door is unlocked."

He turned red. "It was an oversight," he stammered. "Clon is accustomed to lock the door, and he did it inadvertently, forgetting that there was any one —"

"Inside!" I said drily.

"Precisely, Monsieur."

"Ah!" I replied. "Well, I do not think the oversight would please Madame de Cocheforêt, if she heard of it?"

"If Monsieur would have the kindness not to —"

"Mention it, my good fellow?" I answered, looking at him with meaning, as I rose. "No; but it must not occur again."

I saw that this man was not like Clon. He had the instincts of the family servant, and freed from the influences of darkness, felt ashamed of his conduct. While he arranged my clothes, he looked round the room with an air of distaste, and muttered once or twice that the furniture of the principal chambers was packed away.

"M. de Cocheforêt is abroad, I think?" I said, as I dressed.

"And likely to remain there," the man answered carelessly, shrugging his shoulders. "Monsieur will doubtless have heard that he is in trouble. In the meantime, the house is triste, and Monsieur must overlook much, if he stays. Madame

lives retired, and the roads are ill-made and visitors few."

"When the lion was ill the jackals left him," I said.

Louis nodded. "It is true," he answered simply. He made no boast or brag on his own account, I noticed; and it came home to me that he was a faithful fellow, such as I love. I questioned him discreetly, and learned that he and Clon and an older man who lived over the stables were the only male servants left of a great household. Madame, her sister-in-law, and three women completed the family.

It took me some time to repair my wardrobe, so that I dare say it was nearly ten when I left my dismal little room. I found Louis waiting in the corridor, and he told me that Madame de Cocheforêt and Mademoiselle were in the rose-garden, and would be pleased to receive me. I nodded, and he guided me through several dim passages to a parlour with an open door, through which the sun shone in gaily. Cheered by the morning air and this sudden change to pleasantness and life, I stepped lightly out.

The two ladies were walking up and down a wide path which bisected the garden. The weeds grew rankly in the gravel underfoot, the rose-bushes which bordered the walk thrust their branches here and there in untrained freedom, a dark yew hedge which formed the background bristled with rough shoots and sadly needed trimming. But I did not see any of these things then. The grace, the noble air, the distinction of the two women who paced slowly to meet me — and who shared all these qualities greatly as they differed in others — left me no power to notice trifles.

Mademoiselle was a head shorter than her *belle sœur* — a slender woman and petite, with a beautiful face and a fair complexion. She walked with dignity, but beside Madame's stately figure she seemed almost childish. And it was characteristic of the two that Mademoiselle as they drew near to me regarded me with sorrowful attention, Madame with a grave smile.

I bowed low. They returned the salute. "This is my sister," Madame de Cocheforêt said, with a slight, a very slight air of condescension. "Will you please to tell me your name, Monsieur?"

"I am M. de Barthe, a gentleman of Normandy," I said, taking the name of my mother. My own, by a possibility, might be known.

Madame's face wore a puzzled look. "I do not know your name, I think," she said thoughtfully. Doubtless she was going over in her mind all the names with which conspiracy had made her familiar.

"That is my misfortune, Madame," I said humbly.

"Nevertheless I am going to scold you," she rejoined, still eyeing me with some keenness. "I am glad to see that you are none the worse for your adventure — but others may be. And you should have borne that in mind."

"I do not think that I hurt the man seriously," I stammered.

"I do not refer to that," she answered coldly. "You know, or should know, that we are in disgrace here; that the Government regards us already with an evil eye, and that a very small thing would lead them to garrison the village and perhaps oust us from the little the wars have left us. You should have known this and considered

it," she continued. "Whereas — I do not say that you are a braggart, M. de Barthe. But on this one occasion you seem to have played the part of one."

"Madame, I did not think," I stammered.

"Want of thought causes much evil," she answered, smiling. "However, I have spoken, and we trust that while you stay with us you will be more careful. For the rest, Monsieur," she continued graciously, raising her hand to prevent me speaking, "we do not know why you are here, or what plans you are pursuing. And we do not wish to know. It is enough that you are of our side. This house is at your service as long as you please to use it. And if we can aid you in any other way we will do so."

"Madame!" I exclaimed; and there I stopped. I could not say any more. The rose-garden, with its air of neglect, the shadow of the quiet house that fell across it, the great yew hedge which backed it, and was the pattern of one under which I had played in childhood — all had points that pricked me. But the women's kindness, their unquestioning confidence, the noble air of

hospitality which moved them! Against these and their placid beauty in its peaceful frame I had no shield. I turned away, and feigned to be overcome by gratitude. "I have no words — to thank you!" I muttered presently. "I am a little shaken this morning. I — pardon me."

"We will leave you for a while," Mademoiselle de Cocheforêt said, in gentle, pitying tones. "The air will revive you. Louis shall call you when we go to dinner, M. de Barthe. Come, Elise."

I bowed low to hide my face, and they nodded pleasantly — not looking closely at me — as they walked by me to the house. I watched the two gracious, pale-robed figures until the doorway swallowed them, and then I walked away to a quiet corner where the shrubs grew highest and the yew hedge threw its deepest shadow, and I stood to think.

They were strange thoughts, I remember. If the oak can think at the moment the wind uproots it, or the gnarled thorn-bush when the landslip tears it from the slope, they may have such thoughts. I stared at the leaves, at the rotting

blossoms, into the dark cavities of the hedge; I stared mechanically, dazed and wondering. What was the purpose for which I was here? What was the work I had come to do? Above all, how — my God! how was I to do it in the face of these helpless women, who trusted me — who opened their house to me? Clon had not frightened me, nor the loneliness of the leagued village, nor the remoteness of this corner where the dread Cardinal seemed a name, and the King's writ ran slowly, and the rebellion, long quenched elsewhere, still smouldered. But Madame's pure faith, the younger woman's tenderness — how was I to face these?

I cursed the Cardinal, I cursed the English fool who had brought me to this, I cursed the years of plenty and scarceness and the Quartier Marais, and Zaton's, where I had lived like a pig, and —

A touch fell on my arm. I turned. It was Clon. How he had stolen up so quietly, how long he had been at my elbow, I could not tell. But his eyes gleamed spitefully in their deep sockets, and he laughed with his fleshless lips;

and I hated him. In the daylight the man looked more like a death's-head than ever. I fancied I read in his face that he knew my secret, and I flashed into rage at sight of him.

"What is it?" I cried, with another oath. "Don't lay your corpse-claws on me!"

He mowed at me, and, bowing with ironical politeness, pointed to the house. "Is Madame served?" I said impatiently, crushing down my anger. "Is that what you mean, fool?"

He nodded.

"Very well," I retorted. "I can find my way, then. You may go!"

He fell behind, and I strode back through the sunshine and flowers, and along the grass-grown paths, to the door by which I had come. I walked fast, but his shadow kept pace with me, driving out the strange thoughts in which I had been indulging. Slowly but surely it darkened my mood. After all, this was a little, little place; the people who lived here — I shrugged my shoulders. France, power, pleasure, life lay yonder in the great city. A boy might wreck himself

here for a fancy; a man of the world, never. When I entered the room, where the two ladies stood waiting for me by the table, I was myself again.

"Clon made you understand, then?" the younger woman said kindly.

"Yes, Mademoiselle," I answered. On which I saw the two smile at one another, and I added: "He is a strange creature. I wonder you can bear to have him near you."

"Poor man! You do not know his story?" Madame said.

"I have heard something of it," I answered. "Louis told me."

"Well, I do shudder at him, sometimes," she replied, in a low voice. "He has suffered — and horribly, and for us. But I wish it had been on any other service. Spies are necessary things, but one does not wish to have to do with them! Anything in the nature of treachery is so horrible."

"Quick, Louis! the cognac, if you have any there!" Mademoiselle exclaimed. "I am sure you are — still feeling ill, Monsieur."

"No, I thank you," I muttered hoarsely, making an effort to recover myself. "I am quite well. It was an old wound that sometimes touches me."

CHAPTER IV.

MADAME AND MADEMOISELLE.

To be frank, however, it was not the old wound that touched me so nearly, but Madame's words; which, finishing what Clon's sudden appearance in the garden had begun, went a long way towards hardening me and throwing me back into myself. I saw with bitterness — what I had perhaps forgotten for a moment — how great was the chasm which separated me from these women; how impossible it was we could long think alike; how far apart in views, in experience, in aims we were. And while I made a mock in my heart of their high-flown sentiments — or thought I did — I laughed no less at the folly which had led me to dream, even for a moment, that I could, at my age, go back — go back and risk all for a whim, a scruple, the fancy of a lonely hour.

I dare say something of this showed in my face:

for Madame's eyes mirrored a dim reflection of trouble as she looked at me, and Mademoiselle ate nervously and at random. At any rate, I fancied so, and I hastened to compose myself; and the two, in pressing upon me the simple dainties of the table, soon forgot, or appeared to forget, the incident.

Yet in spite of this *contretemps*, that first meal had a strange charm for me. The round table whereat we dined was spread inside the open door which led to the garden, so that the October sunshine fell full on the spotless linen and quaint old plate, and the fresh balmy air filled the room with the scent of sweet herbs. Louis served us with the mien of major-domo, and set on each dish as though it had been a peacock or a mess of ortolans. The woods provided the larger portion of our meal; the garden did its part; the confections Mademoiselle had cooked with her own hand.

By-and-bye, as the meal went on, as Louis trod to and fro across the polished floor, and the last insects of summer hummed sleepily outside, and the two gracious faces continued to smile at me out of the gloom — for the ladies sat with their

backs to the door — I began to dream again. I began to sink again into folly — that was half pleasure, half pain. The fury of the gaming-house and the riot of Zaton's seemed far away. The triumphs of the fencing-room — even they grew cheap and tawdry. I thought of existence as one outside it. I balanced this against that, and wondered whether, after all, the red soutane were so much better than the homely jerkin, or the fame of a day than ease and safety.

And life at Cocheforêt was all after the pattern of this dinner. Each day, I might almost say each meal, gave rise to the same sequence of thoughts. In Clon's presence, or when some word of Madame's, unconsciously harsh, reminded me of the distance between us, I was myself. At other times, in face of this peaceful and intimate life, which was only rendered possible by the remoteness of the place and the peculiar circumstances in which the ladies stood, I felt a strange weakness. The loneliness of the woods that encircled the house, and here and there afforded a distant glimpse of snow-clad peaks; the absence of any link to bind me to the old life, so that at

intervals it seemed unreal; the remoteness of the great world, all tended to sap my will and weaken the purpose which had brought me to this place.

On the fourth day after my coming, however, something happened to break the spell. It chanced that I came late to dinner, and entered the room hastily and without ceremony, expecting to find Madame and her sister already seated. Instead, I found them talking in a low tone by the open door, with every mark of disorder in their appearance; while Clon and Louis stood at a little distance with downcast faces and perplexed looks.

I had time to see all this, and then my entrance wrought a sudden change. Clon and Louis sprang to attention; Madame and her sister came to the table and sat down, and made a shallow pretence of being at their ease. But Mademoiselle's face was pale, her hand trembled; and though Madame's greater self-command enabled her to carry off the matter better, I saw that she was not herself. Once or twice she spoke harshly to Louis; she fell at other times into a brown study; and when she thought I was not watching her, her face wore a look of deep anxiety.

I wondered what all this meant; and I wondered more when, after the meal, the two walked in the garden for an hour with Clon. Mademoiselle came from this interview alone, and I was sure that she had been weeping. Madame and the dark porter stayed outside some time longer; then she, too, came in, and disappeared.

Clon did not return with her, and when I went into the garden five minutes later Louis also had vanished. Save for two women who sat sewing at an upper window, the house seemed to be deserted. Not a sound broke the afternoon stillness of room or garden, and yet I felt that more was happening in this silence than appeared on the surface. I began to grow curious — suspicious; and presently slipped out myself by way of the stables, and, skirting the wood at the back of the house, gained with a little trouble the bridge which crossed the stream and led to the village.

Turning round at this point, I could see the house, and I moved a little aside into the underwood, and stood gazing at the windows, trying to unriddle the matter. It was not likely that

M. de Cocheforêt would repeat his visit so soon; and, besides, the women's emotions had been those of pure dismay and grief, unmixed with any of the satisfaction to which such a meeting, though snatched by stealth, would give rise. I discarded my first thought, therefore — that he had returned unexpectedly — and I sought for another solution.

But none was on the instant forthcoming. The windows remained obstinately blind, no figures appeared on the terrace, the garden lay deserted, and without life. My departure had not, as I half expected it would, drawn the secret into light.

I watched a while, at times cursing my own meanness; but the excitement of the moment and the quest tided me over that. Then I determined to go down into the village and see whether anything was moving there. I had been down to the inn once, and had been received half sulkily, half courteously, as a person privileged at the great house, and therefore to be accepted. It would not be thought odd if I went again; and after a moment's thought, I started down the track.

This, where it ran through the wood, was so densely shaded that the sun penetrated to it little, and in patches only. A squirrel stirred at times, sliding round a trunk, or scampering across the dry leaves. Occasionally a pig grunted and moved farther into the wood. But the place was very quiet, and I do not know how it was that I surprised Clon instead of being surprised by him.

He was walking along the path before me with his eyes on the ground — walking so slowly, and with his lean frame so bent that I might have supposed him ill if I had not remarked the steady movement of his head from right to left, and the alert touch with which he now and again displaced a clod of earth or a cluster of leaves. By-and-bye he rose stiffly, and looked round him suspiciously; but by that time I had slipped behind a trunk, and was not to be seen; and after a brief interval he went back to his task, stooping over it more closely, if possible, than before, and applying himself with even greater care.

By that time I had made up my mind that he was tracking some one. But whom? I could not

make a guess at that. I only knew that the plot was thickening, and began to feel the eagerness of the chase. Of course, if the matter had not to do with Cocheforêt, it was no affair of mine; but though it seemed unlikely that anything could bring him back so soon, he might still be at the bottom of this. And, besides, I felt a natural curiosity. When Clon at last improved his pace, and went on to the village, I took up his task. I called to mind all the wood-lore I had ever known, and scanned trodden mould and crushed leaves with eager eyes. But in vain. I could make nothing of it at all, and rose at last with an aching back and no advantage.

I did not go on to the village after that, but returned to the house, where I found Madame pacing the garden. She looked up eagerly on hearing my step; and I was mistaken if she was not disappointed — if she had not been expecting some one else. She hid the feeling bravely, however, and met me with a careless word; but she turned to the house more than once while we talked, and she seemed to be all the while on the watch, and uneasy. I was not

surprised when Clon's figure presently appeared in the doorway, and she left me abruptly, and went to him. I only felt more certain than before that there was something strange on foot. What it was, and whether it had to do with M. de Cocheforêt, I could not tell. But there it was, and I grew more curious the longer I remained alone.

She came back to me presently, looking thoughtful and a trifle downcast. "That was Clon, was it not?" I said, studying her face.

"Yes," she answered. She spoke absently, and did not look at me.

"How does he talk to you?" I asked, speaking a trifle curtly.

As I intended, my tone roused her. "By signs," she said.

'Is he — is he not a little mad?" I ventured. I wanted to make her talk and forget herself.

She looked at me with sudden keenness, then dropped her eyes.

"You do not like him?" she said, a note of challenge in her voice. "I have noticed that, Monsieur."

"I think he does not like me," I replied.

"He is less trustful than we are," she answered naïvely. "It is natural that he should be. He has seen more of the world."

That silenced me for a moment, but she did not seem to notice it. "I was looking for him a little while ago, and I could not find him," I said, after a pause.

"He has been into the village," she answered.

I longed to pursue the matter farther; but though she seemed to entertain no suspicion of me, I dared not run the risk. I tried her, instead, on another tack. "Mademoiselle de Cocheforêt does not seem very well to-day?" I said.

"No?" she answered carelessly. "Well, now you speak of it, I do not think she is. She is often anxious about — my husband."

She uttered the last two words with a little hesitation, and looked at me quickly when she had spoken them. We were sitting at the moment on a stone seat which had the wall of the house for a back; and, fortunately, I was toying with the branch of a creeping plant that hung over it, so that she could not see more than the

side of my face. For I knew that it altered. Over my voice, however, I had more control, and I hastened to answer, "Yes, I suppose so," as innocently as possible.

"He is at Bosost — in Spain. You knew that, I conclude?" she said, with a certain sharpness. And she looked me in the face again very directly.

"Yes," I answered, beginning to tremble.

"I suppose you have heard, too, that he — that he sometimes crosses the border?" she continued, in a low voice, but with a certain ring of insistence in her tone. "Or, if you have not heard it, you guess it?"

I was in a quandary, and grew, in one second, hot all over. Uncertain what amount of knowledge I ought to admit, I took refuge in gallantry. "I should be surprised if he did not," I answered, with a bow, "being, as he is, so close, and having such an inducement to return, Madame."

She drew a long, shivering sigh — at the thought of his peril, I fancied, and sat back against the wall. Nor did she say any more, though I heard her sigh again. In a moment

she rose. "The afternoons are growing chilly," she said; "I will go in and see how Mademoiselle is. Sometimes she does not come to supper. If she cannot descend this evening, I am afraid you must excuse me too, Monsieur."

I said what was right, and watched her go in; and, as I did so, I loathed my errand, and the mean contemptible curiosity which it had planted in my mind, more than at any former time. These women — I could find it in my heart to hate them for their frankness, for their foolish confidence, and the silly trustfulness that made them so easy a prey!

Nom de Dieu! What did the woman mean by telling me all this? To meet me in such a way, to disarm one by such methods, was to take an unfair advantage. It put a vile — ay, the vilest — aspect, on the work I had to do.

Yet it was very odd! What could M. de Cocheforêt mean by returning so soon, if M. de Cocheforêt was here? And, on the other hand, if it was not his unexpected presence that had so upset the house, what was the secret? Whom had Clon been tracking? And what was the

cause of Madame's anxiety? In a few minutes I began to grow curious again; and, as the ladies did not appear at supper, I had leisure to give my brain full license, and in the course of an hour thought of a hundred keys to the mystery. But none exactly fitted the lock, or laid open the secret.

A false alarm that evening helped to puzzle me still more. I was sitting, about an hour after supper, on the same seat in the garden — I had my cloak and was smoking — when Madame came out like a ghost, and, without seeing me, flitted away through the darkness toward the stables. For a moment I hesitated, then I followed her. She went down the path and round the stables, and so far I understood; but when she had in this way gained the rear of the west wing, she took a track through the thicket to the east of the house again, and so came back to the garden. This gained, she came up the path and went in through the parlour door, and disappeared — after making a clear circuit of the house, and not once pausing or looking to right or left! I confess I was fairly baffled. I sank back on the seat I had

left, and said to myself that this was the lamest of all conclusions. I was sure that she had exchanged no word with any one. I was equally sure that she had not detected my presence behind her. Why, then, had she made this strange promenade, alone, unprotected, an hour after nightfall? No dog had bayed, no one had moved, she had not once paused, or listened, like a person expecting a rencontre. I could not make it out. And I came no nearer to solving it, though I lay awake an hour beyond my usual time.

In the morning neither of the ladies descended to dinner, and I heard that Mademoiselle was not so well. After a lonely meal, therefore — I missed them more than I should have supposed — I retired to my favourite seat, and fell to meditating.

The day was fine, and the garden pleasant. Sitting there with my eyes on the old-fashioned herb-beds, with the old-fashioned scents in the air, and the dark belt of trees bounding the view on either side, I could believe that I had been out of Paris not three weeks, but three months. The quiet lapped me round. I could fancy that I had never loved anything else. The wood-doves cooed

in the stillness; occasionally the harsh cry of a jay jarred the silence. It was an hour after noon, and hot. I think I nodded.

On a sudden, as if in a dream, I saw Clon's face peering at me round the angle of the parlour door. He looked, and in a moment withdrew, and I heard whispering. The door was gently closed. Then all was still again.

But I was wide awake now, and thinking hard. Clearly the people of the house wished to assure themselves that I was asleep and safely out of the way. As clearly, it was to my interest to know what was passing. Giving way to the temptation, I rose quietly, and, stooping below the level of the windows, slipped round the east end of the house, passing between it and the great yew hedge. Here I found all still, and no one stirring. So, keeping a wary eye about me, I went on round the house — reversing the route which Madame had taken the night before — until I gained the rear of the stables. Here I had scarcely paused a second to scan the ground before two persons came out of the stable-court. They were Madame and the porter.

They stood a brief while outside, and looked up and down. Then Madame said something to the man, and he nodded. Leaving him standing where he was, she crossed the grass with a quick, light step, and vanished among the trees.

In a moment my mind was made up to follow; and, as Clon turned at once and went in, I was able to do so before it was too late. Bending low among the shrubs, I ran hot-foot to the point where Madame had entered the wood. Here I found a narrow path, and ran nimbly along it, and presently saw her grey robe fluttering among the trees before me. It only remained to keep out of her sight and give her no chance of discovering that she was followed; and this I set myself to do. Once or twice she glanced round, but the wood was of beech, the light which passed between the leaves was mere twilight, and my clothes were dark-coloured. I had every advantage, therefore, and little to fear as long as I could keep her in view and still remain myself at such a distance that the rustle of my tread would not disturb her.

Assured that she was on her way to meet her

husband, whom my presence kept from the house, I felt that the crisis had come at last; and I grew more excited with each step I took. True, I detested the task of watching her: it filled me with peevish disgust. But in proportion as I hated it I was eager to have it done and be done with it, and succeed, and stuff my ears and begone from the scene. When she presently came to the verge of the beech wood, and, entering a little open clearing, seemed to loiter, I went cautiously This, I thought, must be the rendezvous; and I held back warily, looking to see him step out of the thicket.

But he did not, and by-and-bye she quickened her pace. She crossed the open and entered a wide ride cut through a low, dense wood of alder and dwarf oak — a wood so closely planted, and so intertwined with hazel and elder and box that the branches rose like a solid wall, twelve feet high, on either side of the track.

Down this she passed, and I stood and watched her go; for I dared not follow. The ride stretched away as straight as a line for four or five hundred yards, a green path between green walls. To enter

it was to be immediately detected, if she turned; while the thicket itself permitted no passage. I stood baffled and raging, and watched her pass along. It seemed an age before she at last reached the end, and, turning sharply to the right, was in an instant gone from sight.

I waited then no longer. I started off, and, running as lightly and quietly as I could, I sped down the green alley. The sun shone into it, the trees kept off the wind, and between heat and haste, I sweated finely. But the turf was soft, and the ground fell slightly, and in little more than a minute I gained the end. Fifty yards short of the turning I stayed myself, and, stealing on, looked cautiously the way she had gone.

I saw before me a second ride, the twin of the other, and a hundred and fifty paces down it her grey figure tripping on between the green hedges. I stood and took breath, and cursed the wood and the heat and Madame's wariness. We must have come a league or two-thirds of a league, at least. How far did the man expect her to plod to meet him? I began to grow angry. There is modera-

tion even in the cooking of eggs, and this wood might stretch into Spain, for all I knew!

Presently she turned the corner and was gone again, and I had to repeat my manœuvre. This time, surely, I should find a change. But no! Another green ride stretched away into the depths of the forest, with hedges of varying shades — here light and there dark, as hazel and elder, or thorn, and yew and box prevailed — but always high and stiff and impervious. Half-way down the ride Madame's figure tripped steadily on, the only moving thing in sight. I wondered, stood, and, when she vanished, followed — only to find that she had entered another track, a little narrower, but in every other respect alike.

And so it went on for quite half an hour. Sometimes Madame turned to the right, sometimes to the left. The maze seemed to be endless. Once or twice I wondered whether she had lost her way, and was merely seeking to return. But her steady, purposeful gait, her measured pace, forbade the idea. I noticed, too, that she seldom looked behind her — rarely to right or left. Once the ride down which she passed was car-

peted not with green, but with the silvery, sheeny leaves of some creeping plant that in the distance had a shimmer like that of water at evening. As she trod this, with her face to the low sun, her tall grey figure had a pure air that for the moment startled me — she looked unearthly. Then I swore in scorn of myself, and at the next corner I had my reward. She was no longer walking on. She had stopped, I found, and seated herself on a fallen tree that lay in the ride.

For some time I stood in ambush watching her, and with each minute I grew more impatient. At last I began to doubt — to have strange thoughts. The green walls were growing dark. The sun was sinking; a sharp, white peak, miles and miles away, which closed the vista of the ride began to flush and colour rosily. Finally, but not before I had had leisure to grow uneasy, she stood up and walked on more slowly. I waited, as usual, until the next turning hid her. Then I hastened after her, and, warily passing round the corner — came face to face with her!

I knew all in a moment — that she had fooled me, tricked me, lured me away. Her face was

white with scorn, her eyes blazed; her figure, as she confronted me, trembled with anger and infinite contempt.

"You spy!" she cried. "You hound! You — gentleman! Oh, *mon Dieu!* if you are one of us — if you are really not *canaille* — we shall pay for this some day! We shall pay a heavy reckoning in the time to come! I did not think," she continued — her every syllable like the lash of a whip — "that there was anything so vile as you in this world!"

I stammered something — I do not know what. Her words burned into me — into my heart! Had she been a man, I would have struck her dead!

"You thought you deceived me yesterday," she continued, lowering her tone, but with no lessening of the passion and contempt which curled her lip and gave fulness to her voice. "You plotter! You surface trickster! You thought it an easy task to delude a woman — you find yourself deluded. God give you shame that you may suffer!" she continued mercilessly. "You talked of Clon, but Clon beside you is the most honourable of men!"

"Madame," I said hoarsely — and I know my face was grey as ashes — "let us understand one another."

"God forbid!" she cried, on the instant. "I would not soil myself!"

"Fie! Madame," I said, trembling. "But then, you are a woman. That should cost a man his life!"

She laughed bitterly.

"You say well," she retorted. "I am not a man. Neither am I Madame. Madame de Cocheforêt has spent this afternoon — thanks to your absence and your imbecility — with her husband. Yes, I hope that hurts you!" she went on, savagely snapping her little white teeth together. "To spy and do vile work, and do it ill, Monsieur Mouchard — Monsieur de Mouchard, I should say — I congratulate you!"

"You are not Madame de Cocheforêt!" I cried, stunned — even in the midst of my shame and rage — by this blow.

"No, Monsieur!" she answered grimly. "I am not! And permit me to point out — for we do not all lie easily — that I never said I was

You deceived yourself so skilfully that we had no need to trick you."

"Mademoiselle, then?" I muttered.

"Is Madame!" she cried. "Yes, and I am Mademoiselle de Cocheforêt. And in that character, and in all others, I beg from this moment to close our acquaintance, Sir. When we meet again — if we ever do meet — which God forbid!" she cried, her eyes sparkling, "do not presume to speak to me, or I will have you flogged by the grooms. And do not stain our roof by sleeping under it again. You may lie to-night in the inn. It shall not be said that Cocheforêt," she continued proudly, "returned even treachery with inhospitality; and I will give orders to that end. To-morrow begone back to your master, like the whipped cur you are! Spy and coward!"

With the last fierce words she moved away. I would have said something, I could almost have found it in my heart to stop her and make her hear. Nay, I had dreadful thoughts; for I was the stronger, and I might have done with her as I pleased. But she swept by me so fearlessly — as I might pass some loathsome cripple in the

road — that I stood turned to stone. Without looking at me — without turning her head to see whether I followed or remained, or what I did — she went steadily down the track until the trees and the shadow and the growing darkness hid her grey figure from me; and I found myself alone.

CHAPTER V.

REVENGE.

And full of black rage! Had she only reproached me, or, turning on me in the hour of *my* victory, said all she had now said in the moment of her own, I could have borne it. She might have shamed me then, and I might have taken the shame to myself, and forgiven her. But, as it was, I stood there in the gathering dusk, between the darkening hedges, baffled, tricked, defeated! And by a woman! She had pitted her wits against mine, her woman's will against my experience, and she had come off the victor. And then she had reviled me. As I took it all in, and began to comprehend, also, the more remote results, and how completely her move had made further progress on my part impossible, I hated her. She had tricked me with her gracious ways and her slow-coming smile. And, after all

—for what she had said—it was this man's life or mine. What had I done that another man would not do? *Mon Dieu!* In the future there was nothing I would not do. I would make her smart for those words of hers! I would bring her to her knees!

Still, hot as I was, an hour might have restored me to coolness. But when I started to return, I fell into a fresh rage, for I remembered that I did not know my way out of the maze of rides and paths into which she had drawn me; and this and the mishaps which followed kept my rage hot. For a full hour I wandered in the wood, unable, though I knew where the village lay, to find any track which led continuously in one direction. Whenever, at the end of each attempt, the thicket brought me up short, I fancied I heard her laughing on the farther side of the brake; and the ignominy of this chance punishment, the check which the confinement placed on my rage, almost maddened me. In the darkness, I fell, and rose cursing; I tore my hands with thorns; I stained my suit, which had suffered sadly once before. At length, when I had almost

resigned myself to lie in the wood, I caught sight of the lights of the village, and trembling between haste and anger, pressed towards them. In a few minutes I stood in the little street.

The lights of the inn shone only fifty yards away; but before I could show myself even there pride suggested that I should do something to repair my clothes. I stopped, and scraped and brushed them; and, at the same time, did what I could to compose my features. Then I advanced to the door and knocked. Almost on the instant the landlord's voice cried from the inside, "Enter, Monsieur!"

I raised the latch and went in. The man was alone, squatting over the fire, warming his hands A black pot simmered on the ashes: as I entered, he raised the lid and peeped inside. Then he glanced over his shoulder.

"You expected me?" I said defiantly, walking to the hearth, and setting one of my damp boots on the logs.

"Yes," he answered, nodding curtly. "Your supper is just ready. I thought you would be in about this time."

He grinned as he spoke, and it was with difficulty I suppressed my wrath. "Mademoiselle de Cocheforêt told you," I said, affecting indifference, "where I was?"

"Ay, Mademoiselle — or Madame," he replied, grinning afresh.

So she had told him where she had left me, and how she had tricked me! She had made me the village laughing-stock! My rage flashed out afresh at the thought, and, at the sight of his mocking face, I raised my fist.

But he read the threat in my eyes, and was up in a moment, snarling, with his hand on his knife. "Not again, Monsieur!" he cried, in his vile *patois*. "My head is sore still. Raise your hand, and I will rip you up as I would a pig!"

"Sit down, fool," I said. "I am not going to harm you. Where is your wife?"

"About her business."

"Which should be getting my supper," I retorted sharply.

He rose sullenly, and, fetching a platter, poured the mess of broth and vegetables into it. Then he went to a cupboard and brought out a loaf

of black bread and a measure of wine, and set them also on the table. "You see it," he said laconically.

"And a poor welcome!" I exclaimed.

He flamed into sudden passion at that. Leaning with both his hands on the table, he thrust his rugged face and blood-shot eyes close to mine. His mustachios bristled; his beard trembled. "Hark ye, Sirrah!" he muttered, with sullen emphasis — "be content! I have my suspicions. And if it were not for my lady's orders I would put a knife into you, fair or foul, this very night. You would lie snug outside, instead of inside, and I do not think any one would be the worse. But, as it is, be content. Keep a still tongue; and when you turn your back on Cocheforêt to-morrow keep it turned."

"Tut! tut!" I said — but I confess I was a little out of countenance. "Threatened men live long, you rascal!"

"In Paris!" he answered significantly. "Not here, Monsieur."

He straightened himself with that, nodded once, and went back to the fire, and I shrugged

my shoulders and began to eat, affecting to forget his presence. The logs on the hearth burned sullenly, and gave no light. The poor oil-lamp, casting weird shadows from wall to wall, served only to discover the darkness. The room, with its low roof and earthen floor, and foul clothes flung here and there, reeked of stale meals and garlic and vile cooking. I thought of the parlour at Cocheforêt, and the dainty table, and the stillness, and the scented pot-herbs; and, though I was too old a soldier to eat the worse because my spoon lacked washing, I felt the change, and laid it savagely at Mademoiselle's door.

The landlord, watching me stealthily from his place by the hearth, read my thoughts, and chuckled aloud. "Palace fare, palace manners!" he muttered scornfully. "Set a beggar on horseback, and he will ride — back to the inn!"

"Keep a civil tongue, will you!" I answered, scowling at him.

"Have you finished?" he retorted.

I rose, without deigning to reply, and, going

to the fire, drew off my boots, which were wet through. He, on the instant, swept off the wine and loaf to the cupboard, and then, coming back for the platter I had used, took it, opened the back door, and went out, leaving the door ajar. The draught which came in beat the flame of the lamp this way and that, and gave the dingy, gloomy room an air still more miserable. I rose angrily from the fire, and went to the door, intending to close it with a bang.

But when I reached it, I saw something, between door and jamb, which stayed my hand. The door led to a shed in which the housewife washed pots and the like. I felt some surprise, therefore, when I found a light there at this time of night; still more surprise when I saw what she was doing.

She was seated on the mud floor, with a rush-light before her, and on either side of her a high-piled heap of refuse and rubbish. From one of these, at the moment I caught sight of her, she was sorting things — horrible, filthy sweepings of road or floor — to the other; shaking and sifting each article as she passed it

across, and then taking up another and repeating the action with it, and so on: all minutely, warily, with an air of so much patience and persistence that I stood wondering. Some things — rags — she held up between her eyes and the light, some she passed through her fingers, some she fairly tore in pieces. And all the time her husband stood watching her greedily, my platter still in his hand, as if her strange occupation fascinated him.

I stood looking, also, for half a minute, perhaps; then the man's eye, raised for a single second to the doorway, met mine. He started, muttered something to his wife, and, quick as thought, kicked the light out, leaving the shed in darkness. Cursing him for an ill-conditioned fellow, I walked back to the fire, laughing. In a twinkling he followed me, his face dark with rage.

"*Ventre saint gris!*" he exclaimed, thrusting it close to mine. "Is not a man's house his own?"

"It is, for me," I answered coolly, shrugging my shoulders. "And his wife: if she likes to pick dirty rags at this hour, that is your affair."

"Pig of a spy!" he cried, foaming with rage

I was angry enough at bottom, but I had nothing to gain by quarrelling with the fellow; and I curtly bade him remember himself. "Your mistress gave you your orders," I said contemptuously. "Obey them!"

He spat on the floor, but at the same time he grew calmer. "You are right there," he answered spitefully. "What matter, after all, since you leave to-morrow at six? Your horse has been sent down, and your baggage is above."

"I will go to it," I retorted. "I want none of your company. Give me a light, fellow!"

He obeyed reluctantly, and, glad to turn my back on him, I went up the ladder, still wondering faintly, in the midst of my annoyance, what his wife was about that my chance detection of her had so enraged him. Even now he was not quite himself. He followed me with abuse, and, deprived by my departure of any other means of showing his spite, fell to shouting through the floor, bidding me remember six o'clock, and be stirring; with other taunts, which did not cease until he had tired himself out.

The sight of my belongings — which I had left a few hours before at the Château — strewn about the floor of this garret, went some way towards firing me again. But I was worn out. The indignities and mishaps of the evening had, for once, crushed my spirit, and after swearing an oath or two I began to pack my bags. Vengeance I would have; but the time and manner I left for daylight thought. Beyond six o'clock in the morning I did not look forward; and if I longed for anything it was for a little of the good Armagnac I had wasted on those louts of merchants in the kitchen below. It might have done me good now.

I had wearily strapped up one bag, and nearly filled the other, when I came upon something which did, for the moment, rouse the devil in me. This was the tiny orange-coloured sachet which Mademoiselle had dropped the night I first saw her at the inn, and which, it will be remembered, I picked up. Since that night I had not seen it, and had as good as forgotten it. Now, as I folded up my other doublet, the one I had then been wearing, it dropped from the pocket.

The sight of it recalled all — that night, and Mademoiselle's face in the lanthorn light, and my fine plans, and the end of them; and, in a fit of childish fury, the outcome of long suppressed passion, I snatched up the sachet from the floor and tore it across and across, and flung the pieces down. As they fell, a cloud of fine pungent dust burst from them, and with the dust something heavier, which tinkled sharply on the boards. I looked down to see what this was — perhaps I already repented of my act — but for the moment I could see nothing. The floor was grimy and uninviting, and the light bad.

In certain moods, however, a man is obstinate about small things, and I moved the taper nearer. As I did so, a point of light, a flashing sparkle that shone for a second among the dirt and refuse on the floor, caught my eye. It was gone in a moment, but I had seen it. I stared, and moved the light again, and the spark flashed out afresh, this time in a different place. Much puzzled, I knelt, and, in a twinkling, found a tiny crystal. Hard by lay another — and another; each as large as a fair-sized pea. I took

up the three, and rose to my feet again, the light in one hand, the crystals in the palm of the other.

They were diamonds! — diamonds of price! I knew it in a moment. As I moved the taper to and fro above them, and watched the fire glow and tremble in their depths, I knew that I held that which would buy the crazy inn and all its contents a dozen times over. They were diamonds! Gems so fine, and of so rare a water — or I had never seen gems — that my hand trembled as I held them, and my head grew hot, and my heart beat furiously. For a moment I thought I dreamed, that my fancy played me some trick; and I closed my eyes and did not open them again for a minute. But when I did, there they were, hard, real, and angular. Convinced at last, in a maze of joy and fear, I closed my hand upon them, and, stealing on tip-toe to the trapdoor, laid first my saddle on it, and then my bags, and over all my cloak, breathing fast the while.

Then I stole back; and, taking up the light again, began to search the floor, patiently, inch

by inch, with naked feet, every sound making me tremble as I crept hither and thither over the creaking boards. And never was search more successful or better paid. In the fragments of the sachet I found six smaller diamonds and a pair of rubies. Eight large diamonds I found on the floor. One, the largest and last-found, had bounded away, and lay against the wall in the farthest corner. It took me an hour to run that one to earth; but afterwards I spent another hour on my hands and knees before I gave up the search, and, satisfied at last that I had collected all, sat down on my saddle on the trap-door, and, by the last flickering light of a candle which I had taken from my bag, gloated over my treasure — a treasure worthy of fabled Golconda.

Hardly could I believe in its reality, even now. Recalling the jewels which the English Duke of Buckingham wore on the occasion of his visit to Paris in 1625, and of which there was so much talk, I took these to be as fine, though less in number. They should be worth fifteen thousand crowns, more or less. Fifteen thousand crowns!

And I held them in the hollow of my hand — I who was scarcely worth ten thousand sous.

The candle going out cut short my admiration. Left in the dark with these precious atoms, my first thought was how I might dispose of them safely; which I did, for the time, by secreting them in the lining of my boot. My second thought turned on the question how they had come where I had found them, among the powdered spice and perfumes in Mademoiselle de Cocheforêt's sachet.

A minute's reflection enabled me to come very near the secret, and at the same time shed a flood of light on several dark places. What Clon had been seeking on the path between the house and the village, what the goodwife of the inn had sought among the sweepings of yard and floor, I knew now, — the sachet. I knew, too, what had caused the marked and sudden anxiety I had noticed at the Château — the loss of this sachet.

And there for a while I came to a check. But one step more up the ladder of thought brought all in view. In a flash I guessed how the jewels

had come to be in the sachet; and that it was not Mademoiselle but M. de Cocheforêt who had mislaid them. And I thought the discovery so important that I began to pace the room softly, unable, in my excitement, to remain still.

Doubtless he had dropped the jewels in the hurry of his start from the inn that night! Doubtless, too, he had carried them in that bizarre hiding-place for the sake of safety, considering it unlikely that robbers, if he fell into their hands, would take the sachet from him; as still less likely that they would suspect it to contain anything of value. Everywhere it would pass for a love-gift, the work of his mistress.

Nor did my penetration stop there. Ten to one the gems were family property, the last treasure of the house; and M. de Cocheforêt, when I saw him at the inn, was on his way to convey them out of the country; either to secure them from seizure by the Government, or to raise money by selling them — money to be spent in some last desperate enterprise. For a day or two, perhaps, after leaving Cocheforêt, while the mountain road and its chances occupied his

thoughts, he had not discovered his loss. Then he had searched for the precious sachet, missed it, and returned hot-foot on his tracks.

I was certain that I had hit on the true solution; and all that night I sat wakeful in the darkness, pondering what I should do. The stones, unset as they were, could never be identified, never be claimed. The channel by which they had come to my hands could never be traced. To all intents they were mine — mine, to do with as I pleased! Fifteen thousand crowns! — perhaps twenty thousand crowns! — and I to leave at six in the morning, whether I would or no! I might leave for Spain with the jewels in my pocket.

I confess I was tempted. The gems were so fine that I doubt not some indifferently honest men would have sold salvation for them. But a Berault his honour? No! I was tempted, but not for long. Thank God, a man may be reduced to living by the fortunes of the dice, and may even be called by a woman spy and coward without becoming a thief. The temptation soon left me — I take credit for it — and I fell to

thinking of this and that plan for making use of them. Once it occurred to me to take the jewels to the Cardinal and buy my pardon with them; again, to use them as a trap to capture Cocheforêt; again to — and then about five in the morning, as I sat up on my wretched pallet, while the first light stole slowly in through the cobwebbed, hay-stuffed lattice, there came to me the real plan, the plan of plans, on which I acted.

It charmed me. I smacked my lips over it, and hugged myself, and felt my eyes dilate in the darkness, as I conned it. It seemed cruel, it seemed mean; I cared nothing. Mademoiselle had boasted of her victory over me, of her woman's wits and her acuteness; and of my dulness. She had said her grooms should flog me, she had rated me as if I had been a dog. Very well; we would see now whose brains were the better, whose was the master mind, whose should be the whipping.

The one thing required by my plan was that I should get speech with her; that done, I could trust myself, and my new-found weapon, for the

rest. But that was absolutely necessary; and seeing that there might be some difficulty about it, I determined to descend as if my mind were made up to go; then, on pretence of saddling my horse, I would slip away on foot, and lie in wait near the Château until I saw her come out. Or if I could not effect my purpose in that way — either by reason of the landlord's vigilance, or for any other cause — my course was still easy. I would ride away, and when I had proceeded a mile or so, tie up my horse in the forest and return to the wooden bridge. Thence I could watch the garden and front of the Château until time and chance gave me the opportunity I sought.

So I saw my way quite clearly; and when the fellow below called me, reminding me rudely that I must be going, and that it was six o'clock, I was ready with my answer. I shouted sulkily that I was coming, and, after a decent delay, I took up my saddle and bags and went down.

Viewed by the cold morning light, the inn room looked more smoky, more grimy, more wretched than when I had last seen it. The

goodwife was not visible. The fire was not lighted. No provision, not so much as a stirrup-cup or bowl of porridge cheered the heart. I looked round, sniffing the stale smell of last night's lamp, and grunted. "Are you going to send me out fasting?" I said, affecting a worse humour than I felt.

The landlord was standing by the window, stooping over a great pair of frayed and furrowed thigh-boots, which he was labouring to soften with copious grease. "Mademoiselle ordered no breakfast," he answered, with a malicious grin.

"Well, it does not much matter," I replied grandly. "I shall be at Auch by noon."

"That is as may be," he answered, with another grin. I did not understand him, but I had something else to think about, and I opened the door and stepped out, intending to go to the stable. Then in a second I comprehended. The cold air laden with woodland moisture met me and went to my bones; but it was not that which made me shiver. Outside the door, in the road, sitting on horseback in silence, were two men.

One was Clon. The other, who held a spare horse by the rein — my horse — was a man I had seen at the inn, a rough, shock-headed, hard-bitten fellow. Both were armed, and Clon was booted. His mate rode barefoot, with a rusty spur strapped to one heel.

The moment I saw them a sure and certain fear crept into my mind: it was that made me shiver. But I did not speak to them. I went in again, and closed the door behind me. The landlord was putting on the boots. "What does this mean?" I said hoarsely. I had a clear prescience of what was coming. "Why are these men here?"

"Orders," he answered laconically.

"Whose orders?" I retorted.

"Whose?" he answered bluntly. "Well, Monsieur, that is my business. Enough that we mean to see you out of the country, and out of harm's way."

"But if I will not go?" I cried.

"Monsieur will go," he answered coolly. "There are no strangers in the village to-day," he added, with a significant smile.

"Do you mean to kidnap me?" I replied, in a rage. Behind the rage was something — I will not call it terror, for the brave feel no terror — but it was near akin to it. I had had to do with rough men all my life, but there was a grimness and truculence in the aspect of these three that shook me. When I thought of the dark paths and narrow lanes and cliff-sides we must traverse, whichever road we took, I trembled.

"Kidnap you, Monsieur?" he answered, with an everyday air. "That is as you please to call it. One thing is certain, however," he continued, maliciously touching an arquebuss which he had produced and set upright against a chair while I was at the door; "if you attempt the slightest resistance, we shall know how to put an end to it, either here or on the road."

I drew a deep breath. The very imminence of the danger restored me to the use of my faculties I changed my tone and laughed aloud. "So that is your plan, is it?" I said. "The sooner we start the better, then. And the sooner I see Auch and your back turned, the more I shall be pleased."

He rose. "After you, Monsieur," he said.

I could not restrain a slight shiver. His newborn politeness alarmed me more than his threats. I knew the man and his ways, and I was sure that it boded ill for me.

But I had no pistols, and only my sword and knife, and I knew that resistance at this point must be worse than vain. I went out jauntily, therefore, the landlord coming after me with my saddle and bags.

The street was empty, save for the two waiting horsemen who sat in their saddles looking doggedly before them. The sun had not yet risen, the air was raw. The sky was grey, cloudy, and cold. My thoughts flew back to the morning on which I had found the sachet — at that very spot, almost at that very hour; and for a moment I grew warm again at the thought of the little packet I carried in my boot. But the landlord's dry manner, the sullen silence of his two companions, whose eyes steadily refused to meet mine, chilled me again. For an instant the impulse to refuse to mount, to refuse to go, was almost irresistible; then, knowing the

madness of such a course, which might, and probably would, give the men the chance they desired, I crushed it down and went slowly to my stirrup.

"I wonder you do not want my sword," I said by way of sarcasm, as I swung myself up.

"We are not afraid of it," the innkeeper answered gravely. "You may keep it — for the present."

I made no answer — what answer had I to make? — and we rode at a foot-pace down the street; he and I leading, Clon and the shock-headed man bringing up the rear. The leisurely mode of our departure, the absence of hurry or even haste, the men's indifference whether they were seen, or what was thought, all served to sink my spirits, and deepen my sense of peril. I felt that they suspected me, that they more than half guessed the nature of my errand at Cocheforêt, and that they were not minded to be bound by Mademoiselle's orders. In particular I augured the worst from Clon's appearance. His lean malevolent face and sunken eyes, his very dumbness chilled me. Mercy had no place there.

We rode soberly, so that nearly half an hour elapsed before we gained the brow from which I had taken my first look at Cocheforêt. Among the dwarf oaks whence I had viewed the valley we paused to breathe our horses, and the strange feelings with which I looked back on the scene may be imagined. But I had short time for indulging in sentiment or recollections. A curt word, and we were moving again.

A quarter of a mile farther on the road to Auch dipped into the valley. When we were already half-way down this descent the inn-keeper suddenly stretched out his hand and caught my rein. "This way!" he said.

I saw he would have me turn into a by-path leading south-westwards — a mere track, faint and little trodden and encroached on by trees, which led I knew not whither. I checked my horse. "Why?" I said rebelliously. "Do you think I do not know the road? This is the way to Auch."

"To Auch — yes," he answered bluntly. "But we are not going to Auch."

"Whither then?" I said angrily.

"You will see presently," he replied, with an ugly smile.

"Yes, but I will know now!" I retorted, passion getting the better of me. "I have come so far with you. You will find it more easy to take me farther, if you tell me your plans."

"You are a fool!" he cried, with a snarl.

"Not so," I answered. "I ask only to know whither I am going."

"Into Spain," he said. "Will that satisfy you?"

"And what will you do with me there?" I asked, my heart giving a great bound.

"Hand you over to some friends of ours," he answered curtly, "if you behave yourself. If not, there is a shorter way, and one that will save us some travelling. Make up your mind. Monsieur. Which shall it be?"

CHAPTER VI.

UNDER THE PIC DU MIDI.

So that was their plan. Two or three hours to the southward, the long white glittering wall stretched east and west above the brown woods. Beyond that lay Spain. Once across the border, I might be detained, if no worse happened to me, as a prisoner of war; for we were then at war with Spain on the Italian side. Or I might be handed over to one of the savage bands, half smugglers, half brigands, that held the passes; or be delivered — worst fate of all — into the power of the French exiles, of whom some would be likely to recognize me and cut my throat.

"It is a long way into Spain," I muttered, watching in a kind of fascination Clon handling his pistols.

"I think you will find the other road longer

still!" the landlord answered grimly. "But choose, and be quick about it."

They were three to one, and they had firearms. In effect I had no choice. "Well, if I must I must!" I cried, making up my mind with seeming recklessness. "*Vogue la galère!* Spain be it. It will not be the first time I have heard the dons talk."

The men nodded, as much as to say that they had known what the end would be; the landlord released my rein; and in a trice we were riding down the narrow track, with our faces set towards the mountains.

On one point my mind was now more easy. The men meant fairly by me; and I had no longer to fear, as I had feared, a pistol shot in the back at the first convenient ravine. As far as that went, I might ride in peace. On the other hand, if I let them carry me across the border my fate was sealed. A man set down without credentials or guards among the wild desperadoes who swarmed in war time in the Asturian passes might consider himself fortunate if an easy death fell to his lot. In my case I could make a shrewd guess

what would happen. A single nod of meaning, one muttered word, dropped among the savage men with whom I should be left, and the diamonds hidden in my boot would go neither to the Cardinal nor back to Mademoiselle — nor would it matter to me whither they went.

So while the others talked in their taciturn fashion, or sometimes grinned at my gloomy face, I looked out over the brown woods with eyes that saw, yet did not see. The red squirrel swarming up the trunk, the startled pigs that rushed away grunting from their feast of mast, the solitary rider who met us, armed to the teeth, and passed northwards after whispering with the landlord — all these I saw. But my mind was not with them. It was groping and feeling about like a hunted mole for some way of escape. For time pressed. The slope we were on was growing steeper. By-and-bye we fell into a southward valley, and began to follow it steadily upwards, crossing and recrossing a swiftly rushing stream. The snow-peaks began to be hidden behind the rising bulk of hills that overhung us; and sometimes we could see nothing before or behind but the wooded walls

of our valley rising sheer and green a thousand paces on either hand, with grey rocks half masked by fern and ivy getting here and there through the firs and alders.

It was a wild and sombre scene even at that hour, with the midday sun shining on the rushing water and drawing the scent out of the pines; but I knew that there was worse to come, and sought desperately for some ruse by which I might at least separate the men. Three were too many; with one I might deal. At last, when I had cudgelled my brain for an hour, and almost resigned myself to a sudden charge on the men single-handed — a last desperate resort — I thought of a plan, dangerous, too, and almost desperate, but which still seemed to promise something. It came of my fingers resting in my pocket on the fragments of the orange sachet, which, without having any particular design in my mind, I had taken care to bring with me. I had torn the sachet into four pieces — four corners. As I played mechanically with them, one of my fingers fitted into one, as into a glove; a second finger into another. And the plan came.

Still, before I could move in it, I had to wait until we stopped to bait the flagging horses, which we did about noon at the head of the valley. Then, pretending to drink from the stream, I managed to secure unseen a handful of pebbles, slipping them into the same pocket with the morsels of stuff. On getting to horse again, I carefully fitted a pebble, not too tightly, into the largest scrap, and made ready for the attempt.

The landlord rode on my left, abreast of me; the other two knaves behind. The road at this stage favoured me, for the valley, which drained the bare uplands that lay between the lower spurs and the base of the real mountains, had become wide and shallow. Here were no trees, and the path was a mere sheep-track covered with short crisp grass, and running sometimes on this bank of the stream and sometimes on that.

I waited until the ruffian beside me turned to speak to the men behind. The moment he did so and his eyes were averted, I slipped out the scrap of satin in which I had placed the pebble, and balancing it carefully on my right thigh as I rode, I flipped it forward with all the strength of my

thumb and finger. I meant it to fall a few paces before us in the path, where it could be seen. But alas for my hopes! At the critical moment my horse started, my finger struck the scrap aslant, the pebble flew out, and the bit of stuff fluttered into a whin-bush close to my stirrup — and was lost!

I was bitterly disappointed, for the same thing might happen again, and I had now only three scraps left. But fortune favoured me, by putting it into my neighbour's head to plunge into a hot debate with the shock-headed man on the nature of some animals seen on a distant brow; which he said were izards, while the other maintained that they were common goats. He continued, on this account, to ride with his face turned the other way. I had time to fit another pebble into the second piece of stuff, and sliding it on to my thigh, poised it, and flipped it.

This time my finger struck the tiny missile fairly in the middle, and shot it so far and so truly that it dropped exactly in the path ten paces in front of us. The moment I saw it fall I kicked my neighbour's nag in the ribs; it started, and

he, turning in a rage, hit it. The next instant he pulled it almost on to its haunches.

"Saint Gris!" he cried; and sat glaring at the bit of yellow satin, with his face turned purple and his jaw fallen.

"What is it?" I said, staring at him in turn. "What is the matter, fool?"

"Matter?" he blurted out. "*Mon Dieu!*"

But Clon's excitement surpassed even his. The dumb man no sooner saw what had attracted his comrade's attention, than he uttered an inarticulate and horrible noise, and tumbling off his horse, more like a beast than a man, threw himself bodily on the precious morsel.

The innkeeper was not far behind him. An instant and he was down, too, peering at the thing; and for an instant I thought that they would fight over it. However, though their jealousy was evident, their excitement cooled a little when they discovered that the scrap of stuff was empty; for, fortunately, the pebble had fallen out of it. Still, it threw them into such a fever of eagerness as it was wonderful to witness. They nosed the ground where it had lain, they plucked

up the grass and turf, and passed it through their fingers, they ran to and fro like dogs on a trail; and, glancing askance at one another, came back always together to the point of departure. Neither in his jealousy would suffer the other to be there alone.

The shock-headed man and I sat our horses and looked on; he marvelling, and I pretending to marvel. As the two searched up and down the path, we moved a little out of it to give them space; and presently, when all their heads were turned from me, I let a second morsel drop under a gorse-bush. The shock-headed man, by-and-bye, found this, and gave it to Clon; and, as from the circumstances of the first discovery no suspicion attached to me, I ventured to find the third and last scrap myself. I did not pick it up, but I called the innkeeper, and he pounced on it as I have seen a hawk pounce on a chicken.

They hunted for the fourth morsel, but, of course, in vain, and in the end they desisted, and fitted the three they had together; but neither would let his own portion out of his hands, and each looked at the other across the

spoil with eyes of suspicion. It was strange to see them in that wide-stretching valley, whence grey boar-backs of hills swelled up into the silence of the snow — it was strange, I say, in that vast solitude to see these two, mere dots on its bosom, circling round one another in fierce forgetfulness of the outside world, glaring and shifting their ground like cocks about to engage, and wholly engrossed — by three scraps of orange-colour, invisible at fifty paces!

At last the innkeeper cried with an oath: "I am going back. This must be known down yonder. Give me your pieces, man, and do you go with Antoine. It will be all right."

But Clon, waving a scrap in either hand and thrusting his ghastly mask into the other's face, shook his head in passionate denial. He could not speak, but he made it clear that if any one went back with the news he was the man to go.

"Nonsense!" the landlord retorted fiercely. "We cannot leave Antoine to go on alone with him. Give me the stuff."

But Clon would not. He had no thought of resigning the credit of the discovery, and I began

to think that the two would really come to blows. But there was an alternative, and first one and then the other looked at me. It was a moment of peril, and I knew it. My stratagem might react on myself, and the two, to put an end to this difficulty, agree to put an end to me. But I faced them so coolly and showed so bold a front, and the ground was so open, that the idea took no root. They fell to wrangling again more viciously than before. One tapped his gun and the other his pistols. The landlord scolded, the dumb man gurgled. At last their difference ended as I had hoped it would.

"Very well then, we will both go back!" the innkeeper cried in a rage. "And Antoine must see him on. But the blame be on your head. Do you give the lad your pistols."

Clon took one pistol and gave it to the shock-headed man.

"The other!" the innkeeper said impatiently.

But Clon shook his head with a grim smile, and pointed to the arquebuss.

By a sudden movement the landlord snatched the pistol, and averted Clon's vengeance by

placing both it and the gun in the shock-headed man's hands. "There!" he said, addressing the latter, "now can you do? If Monsieur tries to escape or turn back, shoot him! But four hours' riding should bring you to the Roca Blanca. You will find the men there, and will have no more to do with it."

Antoine did not see things quite in that light, however. He looked at me, and then at the wild track in front of us; and he muttered an oath and said he would die if he would. But the landlord, who was in a frenzy of impatience, drew him aside and talked to him, and in the end seemed to persuade him; for in a few minutes the matter was settled. Antoine came back and said sullenly, "Forward, Monsieur," the two others stood on one side, I shrugged my shoulders and kicked up my horse, and in a twinkling we two were riding on together — man to man. I turned once or twice to see what those we had left behind were doing, and always found them standing in apparent debate; but my guard showed so much jealousy of these movements that I presently shrugged my shoulders again and desisted.

I had racked my brains to bring about this state of things. But, strange to say, now I had succeeded, I found it less satisfactory than I had hoped. I had reduced the odds and got rid of my most dangerous antagonists; but Antoine, left to himself, proved to be as full of suspicion as an egg of meat. He rode a little behind me with his gun across his saddle-bow, and a pistol near his hand, and at the slightest pause on my part, or if I turned to look at him, he muttered his constant "Forward, Monsieur!" in a tone that warned me that his finger was on the trigger. At such a distance he could not miss; and I saw nothing for it but to go on meekly before him — to the Roca Blanca and my fate.

What was to be done? The road presently reached the end of the valley and entered a narrow pine-clad defile, strewn with rocks and boulders, over which the torrent plunged and eddied with a deafening roar. In front the white gleam of waterfalls broke the sombre ranks of climbing trunks. The snow-line lay less than half a mile away on either hand; and crowning all — at the end of the pass, as it seemed to the eye

— rose the pure white pillar of the Pic du Midi shooting up six thousand feet into the blue of heaven Such a scene, so suddenly disclosed, was enough to drive the sense of danger from my mind; and for a moment I reined in my horse. But "Forward, Monsieur!" came the grating order. I fell to earth again, and went on. What was to be done?

I was at my wit's end to know. The man refused to talk, refused to ride abreast of me, would have no dismounting, no halting, no communication at all. He would have nothing but this silent, lonely procession of two, with the muzzle of his gun at my back. And meanwhile we were fast climbing the pass. We had left the others an hour — nearly two. The sun was declining; the time, I supposed, about half-past three.

If he would only let me come within reach of him! Or if anything would fall out to take his attention! When the pass presently widened into a bare and dreary valley, strewn with huge boulders, and with snow lying here and there in the hollows, I looked desperately before me,

and scanned even the vast snow-fields that overhung us and stretched away to the base of the ice-peak. But I saw nothing. No bear swung across the path, no izard showed itself on the cliffs. The keen sharp air cut our cheeks and warned me that we were approaching the summit of the ridge. On all sides were silence and desolation.

Mon Dieu! And the ruffians on whose tender mercies I was to be thrown might come to meet us! They might appear at any moment. In my despair I loosened my hat on my head, and let the first gust carry it to the ground, and then with an oath of annoyance tossed my feet loose to go after it. But the rascal roared to me to keep my seat.

"Forward, Monsieur!" he shouted brutally. "Go on!"

"But my hat!" I cried. "*Mille tonnerres*, man! I must—"

"Forward, Monsieur, or I shoot!" he replied inexorably, raising his gun. "One—two—"

And I went on. But, oh, I was wrathful! That I, Gil de Berault, should be outwitted and

led by the nose, like a ringed bull, by this Gascon lout! That I, whom all Paris knew and feared — if it did not love — the terror of Zaton's, should come to my end in this dismal waste of snow and rock, done to death by some pitiful smuggler or thief! It must not be! Surely in the last resort I could give an account of one man, though his belt were stuffed with pistols!

But how? Only, it seemed, by open force. My heart began to flutter as I planned it; and then grew steady again. A hundred paces before us a gully or ravine on the left ran up into the snow-field. Opposite its mouth a jumble of stones and broken rocks covered the path. I marked this for the place. The knave would need both his hands to hold up his nag over the stones, and, if I turned on him suddenly enough, he might either drop his gun, or fire it harmlessly.

But, in the meantime, something happened; as, at the last moment, things do happen. While we were still fifty yards short of the place, I found his horse's nose creeping for-

ward on a level with my crupper; and, still advancing, until I could see it out of the tail of my eye, and my heart gave a great bound. He was coming abreast of me: he was going to deliver himself into my hands! To cover my excitement, I began to whistle.

"Hush!" he muttered fiercely: his voice sounding strange and unnatural. My first thought was that he was ill, and I turned to him. But he only said again, "Hush! Pass by here quietly, Monsieur."

"Why?" I asked mutinously, curiosity getting the better of me. For had I been wise I had taken no notice; every second his horse was coming up with mine. Its nose was level with my stirrup already.

"Hush, man!" he said again. This time there was no mistake about the panic in his voice. "They call this the Devil's Chapel. God send us safe by it! It is late to be here. Look at those!" he continued, pointing with a finger which visibly shook.

I looked. At the mouth of the gully, in a small space partly cleared of stones stood

three broken shafts, raised on rude pedestals. "Well?" I said in a low voice. The sun which was near setting flushed the great peak above to the colour of blood; but the valley was growing grey and each moment more dreary. "Well, what of those?" I said. In spite of my peril and the excitement of the coming struggle I felt the chill of his fear. Never had I seen so grim, so desolate, so God-forsaken a place! Involuntarily I shivered.

"They were crosses," he muttered, in a voice little above a whisper, while his eyes roved this way and that in terror. "The Curé of Gabas blessed the place, and set them up. But next morning they were as you see them now. Come on, Monsieur, come on!" he continued, plucking at my arm. "It is not safe here after sunset. Pray God, Satan be not at home!"

He had completely forgotten in his panic that he had anything to fear from me. His gun dropped loosely across his saddle, his leg rubbed mine. I saw this, and I changed my plan of action. As our horses reached the stones I stooped, as if to encourage mine, and

by a sudden clutch snatched the gun bodily from his hand; at the same time I backed my horse with all my strength. It was done in a moment! A second and I had him at the end of the gun, and my finger was on the trigger. Never was victory more easily gained.

He looked at me between rage and terror, his jaw fallen. "Are you mad?" he cried, his teeth chattering as he spoke. Even in this strait his eyes left me and wandered round in alarm.

"No, sane!" I retorted fiercely. "But I do not like this place any better than you do!" Which was true enough, if not quite true. "So, by your right, quick march!" I continued imperatively. "Turn your horse, my friend, or take the consequences."

He turned like a lamb, and headed down the valley again, without giving a thought to his pistols. I kept close to him, and in less than a minute we had left the Devil's Chapel well behind us, and were moving down again as we had come up. Only now I held the gun.

When we had gone half a mile or so — until

then I did not feel comfortable myself, and though I thanked Heaven the place existed, thanked Heaven also that I was out of it—I bade him halt. "Take off your belt!" I said curtly, "and throw it down. But, mark me, if you turn, I fire!"

The spirit was quite gone out of him. He obeyed mechanically. I jumped down, still covering him with the gun, and picked up the belt, pistols and all. Then I remounted, and we went on. By-and-bye he asked me sullenly what I was going to do.

"Go back," I said, "and take the road to Auch when I come to it."

"It will be dark in an hour," he answered sulkily.

"I know that," I retorted. "We must camp and do the best we can."

And as I said, we did. The daylight held until we gained the skirts of the pine-wood at the head of the pass. Here I chose a corner a little off the track, and well-sheltered from the wind, and bade him light a fire. I tethered the horses near this and within sight. It remained

only to sup. I had a piece of bread; he had another and an onion. We ate in silence, sitting on opposite sides of the fire.

But after supper I found myself in a dilemma; I did not see how I was to sleep. The ruddy light which gleamed on the knave's swart face and sinewy hands showed also his eyes, black, sullen, and watchful. I knew that the man was plotting revenge; that he would not hesitate to plant his knife between my ribs should I give him a chance. I could find only one alternative to remaining awake. Had I been bloody-minded, I should have chosen it and solved the question at once and in my favour by shooting him as he sat.

But I have never been a cruel man, and I could not find it in my heart to do this. The silence of the mountain and the sky — which seemed a thing apart from the roar of the torrent and not to be broken by it — awed me. The vastness of the solitude in which we sat, the dark void above through which the stars kept shooting, the black gulf below in which the unseen waters boiled and surged, the absence of

other human company or other signs of human existence put such a face upon the deed that I gave up the thought of it with a shudder, and resigned myself, instead, to watch through the night — the long, cold, Pyrenean night. Presently he curled himself up like a dog and slept in the blaze, and then for a couple of hours I sat opposite him, thinking. It seemed years since I had seen Zaton's or thrown the dice. The old life, the old employments — should I ever go back to them? — seemed dim and distant. Would Cocheforêt, the forest and the mountain, the grey Château and its mistresses, seem one day as dim! And if one bit of life could fade so quickly at the unrolling of another, and seem in a moment pale and colourless, would all life some day and somewhere, and all the things we — But faugh! I was growing foolish. I sprang up and kicked the wood together, and, taking up the gun, began to pace to and fro under the cliff. Strange that a little moonlight, a few stars, a breath of solitude should carry a man back to childhood and childish things!

* * * * *

It was three in the afternoon of the next day, and the sun lay hot on the oak groves, and the air was full of warmth as we began to climb the slope, on which the road to Auch shoots out of the track. The yellow bracken and the fallen leaves underfoot seemed to throw up light of themselves, and here and there a patch of ruddy beech lay like a bloodstain on the hillside. In front a herd of pigs routed among the mast, and grunted lazily; and high above us a boy lay watching them. "We part here," I said to my companion. It was my plan to ride a little way on the road to Auch so as to blind his eyes; then, leaving my horse in the forest, I would go on foot to the Château.

"The sooner the better!" he answered, with a snarl. "And I hope I may never see your face again, Monsieur!"

But when we came to the wooden cross at the fork of the roads, and were about to part, the boy we had seen leapt out of the fern and came to meet us. "Hollo!" he cried, in a sing-song tone.

"Well!" my companion answered, drawing rein impatiently. "What is it?"

"There are soldiers in the village."

"Soldiers?" Antoine cried incredulously.

"Ay, devils on horseback!" the lad answered, spitting on the ground. "Three score of them! From Auch!"

Antoine turned to me, his face transformed with fury. "Curse you!" he cried. "This is some of your work! Now we are all undone! And my mistresses! *Sacré!* if I had that gun I would shoot you like a rat!"

"Steady, fool!" I answered roughly. "I know no more of this than you do!"

This was so true that my surprise was as great as his. The Cardinal, who rarely made a change of front, had sent me hither that he might not be forced to send soldiers, and run the risk of all that might arise from such a movement. What of this invasion, then, than which nothing could be less consistent with his plans? I wondered. It was possible, of course, that the travelling merchants, before whom I had played at treason, had reported the facts; and that on this the Commandant at Auch had acted. But it seemed unlikely. He had had his orders, too;

and, under the Cardinal's rule, there was small place for individual enterprise. I could not understand it.

One thing was clear, however. I might now enter the village as I pleased. "I am going on to look into this," I said to Antoine. "Come, my man."

He shrugged his shoulders, and stood still. "Not I!" he answered, with an oath. "No soldiers for me! I have lain out one night, and I can lie out another!"

I nodded indifferently, for I no longer wanted him; and we parted. After this, twenty minutes' riding brought me to the entrance of the village; and here the change was great indeed. Not one of the ordinary dwellers in the place was to be seen: either they had shut themselves up in their hovels, or, like Antoine, they had fled to the woods. Their doors were closed, their windows shuttered. But lounging about the street were a score of dragoons, in boots and breastplates, whose short-barrelled muskets, with pouches and bandoliers attached, were piled near the inn door. In an open space where there was a gap

in the street, a long row of horses, linked head to head, stood bending their muzzles over bundles of rough forage, and on all sides the cheerful jingle of chains and bridles and the sound of coarse jokes and laughter filled the air.

As I rode up to the inn door an old sergeant, with squinting eyes and his tongue in his cheeks, eyed me inquisitively, and started to cross the street to challenge me. Fortunately, at that moment the two knaves whom I had brought from Paris with me, and whom I had left at Auch to await my orders, came up. I made them a sign not to speak to me, and they passed on; but I suppose that they told the sergeant that I was not the man he wanted, for I saw no more of him.

After picketing my horse behind the inn — I could find no better stable, every place being full — I pushed my way through the group at the door, and entered. The old room, with the low grimy roof and the reeking floor, was half full of strange figures, and for a few minutes I stood unseen in the smoke and confusion. Then the landlord came my way, and as he passed

me I caught his eye. He uttered a low curse, dropped the pitcher he was carrying, and stood glaring at me, like a man possessed.

The soldier whose wine he was carrying flung a crust in his face, with, "Now, greasy fingers! What are you staring at?"

"The devil!" the landlord muttered, beginning to tremble.

"Then let me look at him!" the man retorted and he turned on his stool.

He started, finding me standing over him. "At your service!" I said grimly. "A little time and it will be the other way, my friend."

CHAPTER VII.

A MASTER STROKE.

I HAVE a way with me which commonly commands respect; and when the landlord's first terror was over and he would serve me, I managed to get my supper — the first good meal I had had in two days — pretty comfortably in spite of the soldiers' presence. The crowd, too, which filled the room, soon began to melt. The men strayed off in groups to water their horses, or went to hunt up their quarters, until only two or three were left. Dusk had fallen outside; the noise in the street grew less. The firelight began to glow and flicker on the walls, and the wretched room to look as homely as it was in its nature to look. I was pondering for the twentieth time what step I should take next — under these new circumstances — and why the soldiers were here, and whether I should let

the night pass before I moved, when the door, which had been turning on its hinges almost without pause for an hour, opened again, and a woman came in.

She paused a moment on the threshold looking round, and I saw that she had a shawl on her head and a milk-pitcher in her hand, and that her feet and ankles were bare. There was a great rent in her coarse stuff petticoat, and the hand which held the shawl together was brown and dirty. More I did not see; supposing her to be a neighbour stolen in now that the house was quiet to get some milk for her child or the like, I took no further heed of her. I turned to the fire again and plunged into my thoughts.

But to get to the hearth where the goodwife was fidgeting, the woman had to pass in front of me; and as she passed I suppose she stole a look at me from under her shawl. For just when she came between me and the blaze she uttered a low cry and shrank aside — so quickly that she almost stepped on the hearth. The next moment she turned her back to me and

was stooping, whispering in the housewife's ear. A stranger might have thought that she had merely trodden on a hot ember.

But another idea, and a very sharp one, came into my mind; and I stood up silently. The woman's back was towards me, but something in her height, her shape, the pose of her head, hidden as it was by her shawl, seemed familiar. I waited while she hung over the fire whispering, and while the goodwife slowly filled her pitcher out of the great black pot. But when she turned to go, I took a step forward so as to bar her way. And our eyes met.

I could not see her features; they were lost in the shadow of the hood. But I saw a shiver run through her from head to foot. And I knew then that I had made no mistake.

"That is too heavy for you, my girl," I said familiarly, as I might have spoken to a village wench. "I will carry it for you."

One of the men, who remained lolling at the table, laughed, and the other began to sing a low song. The woman trembled in rage or fear, but she kept silence and let me take the jug

from her hands. And when I went to the door and opened it, she followed mechanically. An instant, and the door fell to behind us, shutting off the light and glow, and we two stood together in the growing dusk.

"It is late for you to be out, Mademoiselle," I said politely. "You might meet with some rudeness, dressed as you are. Permit me to see you home."

She shuddered, and I thought I heard her sob, but she did not answer. Instead, she turned and walked quickly through the village in the direction of the Château, keeping in the shadow of the houses. I carried the pitcher and walked beside her; and in the dark I smiled. I knew how shame and impotent rage were working in her. This was something like revenge!

Presently I spoke. "Well, Mademoiselle," I said. "Where are your grooms?"

She gave me one look, her eyes blazing with anger, her face like hate itself; and after that I said no more, but left her in peace, and contented myself with walking at her shoulder until we came to the end of the village, where the

track to the great house plunged into the wood. There she stopped, and turned on me like a wild creature at bay. "What do you want?" she cried hoarsely, breathing as if she had been running.

"To see you safe to the house," I answered coolly.

"And if I will not?" she retorted.

"The choice does not lie with you, Mademoiselle," I answered sternly. "You will go to the house with me, and on the way you will give me an interview; but not here. Here we are not private enough. We may be interrupted at any moment, and I wish to speak to you at length."

I saw her shiver. "What if I will not?" she said again.

"I might call to the nearest soldiers and tell them who you are," I answered coolly. "I might, but I should not. That were a clumsy way of punishing you, and I know a better way. I should go to the captain, Mademoiselle, and tell him whose horse is locked up in the inn stable. A trooper told me — as some one had told him — that it belonged to one of his officers;

but I looked through the crack, and I knew the horse again."

She could not repress a groan. I waited. Still she did not speak. "Shall I go to the captain?" I said ruthlessly.

She shook the hood back from her face, and looked at me. "Oh, you coward! you coward!" she hissed through her teeth. "If I had a knife!"

"But you have not, Mademoiselle," I answered, unmoved. "Be good enough, therefore, to make up your mind which it is to be. Am I to go with my news to the captain, or am I to come with you?"

"Give me the pitcher!" she said harshly.

I did so, wondering. In a moment she flung it with a savage gesture far into the bushes. "Come!" she said, "if you will. But some day God will punish you!"

Without another word she turned and entered the path through the trees, and I followed her. I suppose every turn in its course, every hollow and broken place in it had been known to her from childhood, for she followed it swiftly and unerringly, barefoot as she was. I had to walk

fast through the darkness to keep up with her. The wood was quiet, but the frogs were beginning to croak in the pool, and their persistent chorus reminded me of the night when I had come to the house-door hurt and worn out, and Clon had admitted me, and she had stood under the gallery in the hall. Things had looked dark then. I had seen but a very little way ahead. Now all was plain. The Commandant might be here with all his soldiers, but it was I who held the strings.

We came to the little wooden bridge and saw beyond the dark meadows the lights of the house. All the windows were bright. Doubtless the troopers were making merry. "Now, Mademoiselle," I said quietly. "I must trouble you to stop here, and give me your attention for a few minutes. Afterwards you may go your way."

"Speak!" she said defiantly. "And be quick! I cannot breathe the air where you are! It poisons me!"

"Ah!" I said slowly. "Do you think you make things better by such speeches as those?"

"Oh!" she cried — and I heard her teeth click together. "Would you have me fawn on you?"

"Perhaps not," I answered. "Still you make one mistake."

"What is it?" she panted.

"You forget that I am to be feared as well as — loathed!" I answered grimly. "Ay, Mademoiselle, to be feared!" I continued. "Do you think that I do not know why you are here in this guise? Do you think that I do not know for whom that pitcher of broth was intended? Or who will now have to fast to-night? I tell you I know all these things. Your house is full of soldiers; your servants were watched and could not leave. You had to come yourself and get food for him!"

She clutched at the hand-rail of the bridge, and for an instant clung to it for support. Her face, from which the shawl had fallen, glimmered white in the shadow of the trees. At last I had shaken her pride. At last! "What is your price?" she murmured faintly.

"I am going to tell you," I replied, speaking so that every word might fall distinctly on her ears, and sating my eyes on her proud face. I had never dreamed of such revenge as this!

"About a fortnight ago, M. de Cocheforêt left here at night with a little orange-coloured sachet in his possession."

She uttered a stifled cry, and drew herself stiffly erect.

"It contained — but there, Mademoiselle, you know its contents," I went on. "Whatever they were, M. de Cocheforêt lost it and them at starting. A week ago he came back — unfortunately for himself — to seek them."

She was looking full in my face now. She seemed scarcely to breathe in the intensity of her surprise and expectation. "You had a search made, Mademoiselle," I continued quietly. "Your servants left no place unexplored. The paths, the roads, the very woods were ransacked. But in vain, because all the while the orange sachet lay whole and unopened in my pocket."

"No!" she cried impetuously. "You lie, Sir! The sachet was found, torn open, many leagues from this place!"

"Where I threw it, Mademoiselle," I replied, "that I might mislead your rascals and be free to return. Oh! believe me," I continued, letting

something of myself, something of my triumph, appear at last in my voice. "You have made a mistake! You would have done better had you trusted me. I am no bundle of sawdust, Mademoiselle, but a man: a man with an arm to shield and a brain to serve, and — as I am going to teach you — a heart also!"

She shivered.

"In the orange-coloured sachet that you lost I believe there were eighteen stones of great value?"

She made no answer, but she looked at me as if I fascinated her. Her very breath seemed to pause and wait on my words. She was so little conscious of anything else, of anything outside ourselves, that a score of men might have come up behind her unseen and unnoticed.

I took from my breast a little packet wrapped in soft leather, and held it towards her. "Will you open this?" I said. "I believe it contains what you lost. That it contains all I will not answer, Mademoiselle, because I spilled the stones on the floor of my room, and I may have failed to find some. But the others can be recovered — I know where they are."

She took the packet slowly and began to unroll it, her fingers shaking. A few turns and the mild lustre of the stones made a kind of moonlight in her hands — such a shimmering glory of imprisoned light as has ruined many a woman and robbed many a man of his honour. *Morbleu!* as I looked at them — and as she stood looking at them in dull, entranced perplexity — I wondered how I had come to resist the temptation.

While I gazed her hands began to waver. "I cannot count," she muttered helplessly. "How many are there?"

"In all, eighteen.'

"They should be eighteen," she said.

She closed her hand on them with that, and opened it again, and did so twice, as if to reassure herself that the stones were real and that she was not dreaming. Then she turned to me with sudden fierceness, and I saw that her beautiful face, sharpened by the greed of possession, was grown as keen and vicious as before. "Well?" she muttered between her teeth. "Your price, man? Your price?"

"I am coming to it now, Mademoiselle," I said gravely. "It is a simple matter. You remember the afternoon when I followed you — clumsily and thoughtlessly perhaps — through the wood to restore these things? It seems about a month ago. I believe it happened the day before yesterday. You called me then some very harsh names, which I will not hurt you by repeating. The only price I ask for restoring your jewels is that you recall those names"

"How?" she muttered. "I do not understand.'

I repeated my words very slowly. "The only price or reward I ask, Mademoiselle, is that you take back those names, and say that they were not deserved."

"And the jewels?" she exclaimed hoarsely.

"They are yours. They are nothing to me. Take them, and say that you do not think of me — Nay, I cannot say the words, Mademoiselle."

"But there is something — else! What else?" she cried, her head thrown back, her eyes, bright as any wild animal's, searching mine. "Ha! my brother? What of him? What of him, Sir?"

"For him, Mademoiselle—I would prefer that you should tell me no more than I know already," I answered in a low voice. "I do not wish to be in that affair. But yes, there is one thing I have not mentioned. You are right."

She sighed so deeply that I caught the sound.

"It is," I continued slowly, "that you will permit me to remain at Cocheforêt for a few days, while the soldiers are here. I am told that there are twenty men and two officers quartered in your house. Your brother is away. I ask to be permitted, Mademoiselle, to take his place for the time, and to be privileged to protect your sister and yourself from insult. That is all."

She raised her hand to her head. After a long pause: "The frogs!" she muttered, "they croak! I cannot hear."

And then, to my surprise, she turned suddenly on her heel, and walked over the bridge, leaving me there. For a moment I stood aghast, peering after her shadowy figure, and wondering what had taken her. Then, in a minute or less, she came quickly back to me, and I understood. She was crying.

"M. de Barthe," she said, in a trembling voice, which told me that the victory was won. "Is there nothing else? Have you no other penance for me?"

"None, Mademoiselle."

She had drawn the shawl over her head, and I no longer saw her face. "That is all you ask?" she murmured.

"That is all I ask — now," I answered.

"It is granted," she said slowly and firmly. "Forgive me if I seem to speak lightly — if I seem to make little of your generosity or my shame; but I can say no more now. I am so deep in trouble and so gnawed by terror that — I cannot feel anything much to-night, either shame or gratitude. I am in a dream; God grant it may pass as a dream! We are sunk in trouble. But for you and what you have done, M. de Barthe — I —" she paused and I heard her fighting with the sobs which choked her — "forgive me. . . . I am overwrought. And my — my feet are cold," she added suddenly and irrelevantly. "Will you take me home?"

"Ah, Mademoiselle," I cried remorsefully, "I have been a beast! You are barefoot, and I have kept you here."

"It is nothing," she said in a voice which thrilled me. "My heart is warm, Monsieur — thanks to you. It is many hours since it has been as warm."

She stepped out of the shadow as she spoke — and there, the thing was done. As I had planned, so it had come about. Once more I was crossing the meadow in the dark to be received at Cocheforêt a welcome guest. The frogs croaked in the pool and a bat swooped round us in circles; and surely never — never, I thought, with a kind of exultation in my breast — had man been placed in a stranger position.

Somewhere in the black wood behind us — probably in the outskirts of the village — lurked M. de Cocheforêt. In the great house before us, outlined by a score of lighted windows, were the soldiers come from Auch to take him. Between the two, moving side by side in the darkness, in a silence which each found to be eloquent, were Mademoiselle and I: she who knew so much, I who knew all — all but one little thing!

We reached the house, and I suggested that

she should steal in first by the way she had come out, and that I should wait a little and knock at the door when she had had time to explain matters to Clon.

"They do not let me see Clon," she answered slowly.

"Then your woman must tell him," I rejoined. "Or he may say something and betray me."

"They will not let our woman come to us."

"What?" I cried, astonished. "But this is infamous. You are not prisoners!"

Mademoiselle laughed harshly. "Are we not? Well, I suppose not; for if we wanted company, Captain Larolle said he would be delighted to see us — in the parlour."

"He has taken your parlour?" I said.

"He and his lieutenant sit there. But I suppose we should be thankful," she added bitterly. "We have still our bed-rooms left to us."

"Very well," I said. "Then I must deal with Clon as I can. But I have still a favour to ask, Mademoiselle. It is only that you and your sister will descend to-morrow at your usual time. I shall be in the parlour."

"I would rather not," she said, pausing and speaking in a troubled voice.

"Are you afraid?"

"No, Monsieur; I am not afraid," she answered proudly. "But—"

"You will come?" I said.

She sighed before she spoke. At length, "Yes, I will come—if you wish it," she answered; and the next moment she was gone round the corner of the house, while I laughed to think of the excellent watch these gallant gentlemen were keeping. M. de Cocheforêt might have been with her in the garden, might have talked with her as I had talked, might have entered the house even, and passed under their noses scot-free. But that is the way of soldiers. They are always ready for the enemy, with drums beating and flags flying—at ten o'clock in the morning. But he does not always come at that hour.

I waited a little, and then I groped my way to the door, and knocked on it with the hilt of my sword. The dogs began to bark at the back, and the chorus of a drinking-song, which came fitfully from the east wing, ceased altogether. An inner

door opened, and an angry voice, apparently an officer's, began to rate some one for not coming. Another moment, and a clamour of voices and footsteps seemed to pour into the hall, and fill it. I heard the bar jerked away, the door was flung open, and in a twinkling a lanthorn, behind which a dozen flushed visages were dimly seen, was thrust into my face.

"Why, who the fiend is this?" cried one, glaring at me in astonishment.

"*Morbleu!* It is the man!" another shrieked. "Seize him!"

In a moment half a dozen hands were laid on my shoulders, but I only bowed politely. "The officer, my friends," I said, "M. le Capitaine Larolle. Where is he?"

"*Diable!* but who are you, first?" the lanthorn-bearer retorted bluntly. He was a tall, lanky sergeant, with a sinister face.

"Well, I am not M. de Cocheforêt," I replied; "and that must satisfy you, my man. For the rest, if you do not fetch Captain Larolle at once and admit me, you will find the consequences inconvenient."

"Ho! ho!" he said, with a sneer. "You can crow, it seems. Well, come in."

They made way, and I walked into the hall, keeping my hat on. On the great hearth a fire had been kindled, but it had gone out. Three or four carbines stood against one wall, and beside them lay a heap of haversacks and some straw. A shattered stool, broken in a frolic, and half a dozen empty wine-skins strewed the floor, and helped to give the place an air of untidiness and disorder. I looked round with eyes of disgust, and my gorge rose. They had spilled oil, and the place reeked foully.

"*Ventre bleu!*" I said. "Is this conduct in a gentleman's house, you rascals? *Ma vie!* If I had you, I would send half of you to the wooden horse!"

They gazed at me open-mouthed. My arrogance startled them. The sergeant alone scowled. When he could find his voice for rage—

"This way!" he said. "We did not know a general officer was coming, or we would have been better prepared!" And muttering oaths under his breath, he led me down the well-known

passage. At the door of the parlour he stopped. "Introduce yourself!" he said rudely. "And if you find the air warm, don't blame me!"

I raised the latch and went in. At a table in front of the hearth, half covered with glasses and bottles, sat two men playing hazard. The dice rang sharply as I entered, and he who had just thrown kept the box over them while he turned, scowling, to see who came in. He was a fair-haired, blonde man, large-framed and florid. He had put off his cuirass and boots, and his doublet showed frayed and stained where the armour had pressed on it. But otherwise he was in the extreme of last year's fashion. His deep cravat, folded over so that the laced ends drooped a little in front, was of the finest; his great sash of blue and silver was a foot wide. He had a little jewel in one ear, and his tiny beard was peaked *à l'Espagnole*. Probably when he turned he expected to see the sergeant, for at sight of me he rose slowly, leaving the dice still covered.

"What folly is this?" he cried wrathfully. "Here, Sergeant! Sergeant!—without there! What the—! Who are you, Sir?"

"Captain Larolle," I said, uncovering politely, "I believe?"

"Yes, I am Captain Larolle," he retorted. "But who, in the fiend's name, are you? You are not the man we are after!"

"I am not M. Cocheforêt," I said coolly. "I am merely a guest in the house, M. le Capitaine. I have been enjoying Madame de Cocheforêt's hospitality for some time, but by an evil chance I was away when you arrived." And with that I walked to the hearth, and, gently pushing aside his great boots which stood there drying, kicked the logs into a blaze.

"*Mille diables!*" he whispered. And never did I see a man more confounded. But I affected to be taken up with his companion, a sturdy, white-mustachioed old veteran, who sat back in his chair, eyeing me, with swollen cheeks and eyes surcharged with surprise.

"Good evening, M. le Lieutenant," I said, bowing gravely. "It is a fine night."

Then the storm burst.

"Fine night!" the captain shrieked, finding his voice again. "*Mille diables!* Are you aware.

Sir, that I am in possession of this house, and that no one harbours here without my permission? Guest! Hospitality! Lieutenant — call the guard! Call the guard!" he continued passionately. "Where is that ape of a sergeant?"

The lieutenant rose to obey, but I lifted my hand.

"Gently, gently, Captain," I said. "Not so fast! You seem surprised to see me here. Believe me, I am much more surprised to see you."

"*Sacré!*" he cried, recoiling at this fresh impertinence, while the lieutenant's eyes almost jumped out of his head.

But nothing moved me.

"Is the door closed?" I said sweetly. "Thank you; it is, I see. Then permit me to say again, gentlemen, that I am much more surprised to see you than you can be to see me. When Monseigneur the Cardinal honoured me by sending me from Paris to conduct this matter, he gave me the fullest — the fullest powers, M. le Capitaine — to see the affair to an end. I was not led to expect that my plans would be spoiled on the eve of success by the intrusion of half the garrison from Auch!"

"O ho!" the captain said softly — in a very different tone and with a very different face. "So you are the gentleman I heard of at Auch?"

"Very likely," I said drily. "But I am from Paris, not Auch."

"To be sure," he answered thoughtfully. "Eh, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, M. le Capitaine, no doubt," the inferior replied. And they both looked at one another, and then at me, in a way I did not understand.

"I think," said I, to clinch the matter, "that you have made a mistake, Captain; or the Commandant has. And it occurs to me that the Cardinal will not be best pleased."

"I hold the King's commission," he answered rather stiffly.

"To be sure," I replied. "But you see the Cardinal —"

"Ah, but the Cardinal —" he rejoined quickly; and then he stopped and shrugged his shoulders. And they both looked at me.

"Well?" I said.

"The King," he answered slowly.

"Tut-tut!" I exclaimed, spreading out my

hands. "The Cardinal. Let us stick to him. You were saying?"

"Well, the Cardinal, you see—" And then again, after the same words, he stopped—stopped abruptly and shrugged his shoulders.

I began to suspect something. "If you have anything to say against Monseigneur," I answered, watching him narrowly, "say it. But take a word of advice. Don't let it go beyond the door of this room, my friend, and it will do you no harm."

"Neither here nor outside," he retorted, looking for a moment at his comrade. "Only I hold the King's commission. That is all. And I think enough. For the rest, will you throw a main? Good! Lieutenant, find a glass, and the gentleman a seat. And here, for my part, I will give you a toast. The Cardinal—whatever betide!"

I drank it, and sat down to play with him; I had not heard the music of the dice for a month, and the temptation was irresistible. But I was not satisfied. I called the mains and won his crowns,—he was a mere baby at the

game, — but half my mind was elsewhere. There was something here I did not understand; some influence at work on which I had not counted; something moving under the surface as unintelligible to me as the soldiers' presence. Had the captain repudiated my commission altogether, and put me to the door or sent me to the guard-house, I could have followed that. But these dubious hints, this passive resistance, puzzled me. Had they news from Paris, I wondered. Was the King dead? or the Cardinal ill? I asked them. But they said no, no, no to all, and gave me guarded answers. And midnight found us still playing; and still fencing.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE QUESTION.

"SWEEP the room, Monsieur? And remove this medley? But, M. le Capitaine — "

"The captain is at the village," I replied sternly. "And do you move! move, man, and the thing will be done while you are talking about it. Set the door into the garden open — so!"

"Certainly, it is a fine morning. And the tobacco of M. le Lieutenant — But M. le Capitaine did not — "

"Give orders? Well, I give them!" I answered. "First of all, remove these beds. And bustle, man, bustle, or I will find something to quicken you."

In a moment — "And M. le Capitaine's riding-boots?"

"Place them in the passage," I replied.

"*Ohé!* In the passage?" He paused, looking at them in doubt.

"Yes, booby; in the passage."

"And the cloaks, Monsieur?"

"There is a bush handy outside the window. Let them air."

"*Ohé*, the bush? Well, to be sure they are damp. But—yes, yes, Monsieur, it is done. And the holsters?"

"There also!" I said harshly. "Throw them out. Faugh! The place reeks of leather. Now, a clean hearth. And set the table before the open door, so that we may see the garden. So. And tell the cook that we shall dine at eleven, and that Madame and Mademoiselle will descend."

"*Ohé!* But M. le Capitaine ordered the dinner for half past eleven?"

"It must be advanced, then; and, mark you, my friend, if it is not ready when Madame comes down, you will suffer, and the cook too."

When he was gone on his errand, I looked round. What else was lacking? The sun shone cheerily on the polished floor; the air, freshened by the rain which had fallen in the night, entered

freely through the open doorway. A few bees lingering with the summer hummed outside. The fire crackled bravely; an old hound, blind and past work, lay warming its hide on the hearth. I could think of nothing more, and I stood and watched the man set out the table and spread the cloth. "For how many, Monsieur?" he asked, in a scared tone.

"For five," I answered; and I could not help smiling at myself. What would Zaton's say could it see Berault turned housewife? There was a white glazed cup — an old-fashioned piece of the second Henry's time — standing on a shelf. I took it down and put some late flowers in it, and set it in the middle of the table, and stood off myself to look at it. But a moment later, thinking I heard them coming, I hurried it away in a kind of panic, feeling on a sudden ashamed of the thing. The alarm proved to be false, however; and then again, taking another turn, I set the piece back. I had done nothing so foolish for — for more years than I liked to count.

But when Madame and Mademoiselle came, they had eyes neither for the flowers nor the

room. They had heard that the captain was out beating the village and the woods for the fugitive, and where I had looked for a comedy I found a tragedy. Madame's face was so red with weeping that all her beauty was gone. She started and shook at the slightest sound, and, unable to find any words to answer my greeting, could only sink into a chair and sit crying silently.

Mademoiselle was in a mood scarcely more cheerful. She did not weep, but her manner was hard and fierce. She spoke absently and answered fretfully. Her eyes glittered, and she had the air of straining her ears continually to catch some dreaded sound. "There is no news, Monsieur?" she said, as she took her seat. And she shot a swift look at me.

"None, Mademoiselle."

"They are searching the village?"

"I believe so."

"Where is Clon?" This in a lower voice, and with a kind of shrinking in her face.

I shook my head. "I believe they have him confined somewhere. And Louis, too," I said. "But I have not seen either of them."

"And where are —? I thought these people would be here," she muttered. And she glanced askance at the two vacant places. The servant had brought in the meal.

"They will be here presently," I said coolly. "Let us make the most of the time. A little wine and food will do Madame good."

She smiled rather sadly. "I think we have changed places," she said; "and that you have turned host, and we guests."

"Let it be so," I said cheerfully. "I recommend some of this ragoût. Come, Mademoiselle; fasting can aid no one. A full meal has saved many a man's life."

It was clumsily said perhaps, for she shuddered and looked at me with a ghastly smile. But she persuaded her sister to taste something; and she took something on her own plate and raised her fork to her lips. But in a moment she laid it down again. "I cannot," she murmured. "I cannot swallow. Oh, my God, at this moment they may be taking him!"

I thought that she was about to burst into a passion of tears, and I repented that I had

induced her to descend. But her self-control was not yet exhausted. By an effort painful to see, she recovered her composure. She took up her fork, and ate a few mouthfuls. Then she looked at me with a fierce under-look. "I want to see Clon," she whispered feverishly. The man who waited on us had left the room.

"He knows?" I said.

She nodded, her beautiful face strangely disfigured. Her closed teeth showed between her lips. Two red spots burned in her white cheeks, and she breathed quickly. I felt, as I looked at her, a sudden pain at my heart; and a shuddering fear, such as a man awaking to find himself falling over a precipice, might feel. How these women loved the man!

For a moment I could not speak. When I found my voice it sounded dry and husky. "He is a safe confidant," I muttered. "He can neither speak nor write, Mademoiselle."

"No, but—" and then her face became fixed. "They are coming," she whispered. "Hush!" She rose stiffly, and stood supporting herself by the table. "Have they — have they — found

him?" she muttered. The woman by her side wept on, unconscious what was impending.

I heard the captain stumble far down the passage, and swear loudly; and I touched Mademoiselle's hand. "They have not!" I whispered. "All is well, Mademoiselle. Pray, pray calm yourself. Sit down, and meet them as if nothing were the matter. And your sister! Madame, Madame," I cried, almost harshly, "compose yourself. Remember that you have a part to play."

My appeal did something. Madame stifled her sobs. Mademoiselle drew a deep breath and sat down; and though she was still pale and still trembled, the worst was past.

And just in time. The door flew open with a crash. The captain stumbled into the room, swearing afresh. "*Sacré nom du Diable!*" he cried, his face crimson with rage. "What fool placed these things here? My boots? My—"

His jaw fell. He stopped on the word, stricken silent by the new aspect of the room, by the sight of the little party at the table, by all the changes I had worked. "*Saint*

Siége!" he muttered. "What is this?" The lieutenant's grizzled face peering over his shoulder completed the picture.

"You are rather late, M. le Capitaine," I said cheerfully. "Madame's hour is eleven. But come, here are your seats waiting for you."

"*Mille tonnerres!*" he muttered, advancing into the room, and glaring at us.

"I am afraid the ragoût is cold," I continued, peering into the dish and affecting to see nothing. "The soup, however, has been kept hot by the fire. But I think you do not see Madame."

He opened his mouth to swear, but for the moment thought better of it. "Who — who put my boots in the passage?" he asked, his voice thick with rage. He did not bow to the ladies, or take any notice of their presence.

"One of the men, I suppose," I said indifferently. "Is anything missing?"

He glared at me. Then his cloak, spread outside, caught his eye He strode through the door, saw his holsters lying on the grass, and other things strewn about. He came back. "Whose monkey game is this?" he snarled, and

his face was very ugly. "Who is at the bottom of this? Speak, Sir, or I—"

"Tut-tut! the ladies!" I said. "You forget yourself, Monsieur."

"Forget myself?" he hissed, and this time he did not check his oath. "Don't talk to me of the ladies! Madame? Bah! Do you think, fool, that we are put into rebels' houses to bow and smile and take dancing lessons?"

"In this case a lesson in politeness were more to the point, Monsieur," I said sternly. And I rose.

"Was it by your orders that this was done?" he retorted, his brow black with passion. "Answer, will you?"

"It was!" I replied outright.

"Then take that!" he cried, dashing his hat violently in my face. "And come outside."

"With pleasure, Monsieur," I answered, bowing. "In one moment. Permit me to find my sword. I think it is in the passage."

I went thither to get it. When I returned I found that the two men were waiting for me in the garden, while the ladies had risen from the

table and were standing near it with blanched faces. "You had better take your sister upstairs, Mademoiselle," I said gently, pausing a moment beside them. "Have no fear. All will be well."

"But what is it?" she answered, looking troubled. "It was so sudden. I am — I did not understand. You quarrelled so quickly."

"It is very simple," I answered, smiling. "M. le Capitaine insulted you yesterday; he will pay for it to-day. That is all. Or, not quite all," I continued, dropping my voice and speaking in a different tone. "His removal may help you, Mademoiselle. Do you understand? I think that there will be no more searching to-day."

She uttered an exclamation, grasping my arm and peering into my face. "You will kill him?" she muttered.

I nodded. "Why not?" I said.

She caught her breath and stood with one hand clasped to her bosom, gazing at me with parted lips, the blood mounting to her cheeks. Gradually the flush melted into a fierce smile. "Yes, yes, why not?" she repeated, between her teeth. "Why not?" She had her hand on my arm.

and I felt her fingers tighten until I could have winced. "Why not? So you planned this — for us, Monsieur?"

I nodded.

"But can you?"

"Safely," I said; then, muttering to her to take her sister upstairs, I turned towards the garden. My foot was already on the threshold, and I was composing my face to meet the enemy, when I heard a movement behind me. The next moment her hand was on my arm. "Wait! Wait a moment! Come back!" she panted. I turned. The smile and flush had vanished; her face was pale. "No!" she said abruptly. "I was wrong! I will not have it. I will have no part in it! You planned it last night, M. de Barthe. It is murder."

"Mademoiselle!" I exclaimed, wondering. "Murder? Why? It is a duel."

"It is murder," she answered persistently. "You planned it last night. You said so."

"But I risk my own life," I replied sharply.

"Nevertheless — I will have no part in it," she answered more faintly. "It will bring no

good." She was trembling with agitation. Her eyes avoided mine.

"On my shoulders be it then!" I replied stoutly. "It is too late, Mademoiselle, to go back. They are waiting for me. Only, before I go, let me beg of you to retire."

And I turned from her, and went out, wondering and thinking. First, that women were strange things. Secondly — *murder?* Merely because I had planned the duel and provoked the quarrel! Never had I heard anything so preposterous. Grant it, and dub every man who kept his honour with his hands a Cain — and a good many branded faces would be seen in some streets. I laughed at the fancy, as I strode down the garden walk.

And yet, perhaps, I was going to do a foolish thing. The lieutenant would still be here: a hard, bitter man, of stiffer stuff than his captain. And the troopers. What if, when I had killed their leader, they made the place too hot for me, Monseigneur's commission notwithstanding? I should look silly, indeed, if on the eve of success I were driven from the place by a parcel of jack-boots.

I liked the thought so little that I hesitated. Yet it seemed too late to retreat. The captain and the lieutenant were waiting in a little open space fifty yards from the house, where a narrower path crossed the broad walk, down which I had first seen Mademoiselle and her sister pacing. The captain had removed his doublet, and stood in his shirt leaning against the sundial, his head bare and his sinewy throat uncovered. He had drawn his rapier and stood pricking the ground impatiently. I marked his strong and nervous frame and his sanguine air: and twenty years earlier the sight might have damped me. But no thought of the kind entered my head now, and though I felt with each moment greater reluctance to engage, doubt of the issue had no place in my calculations.

I made ready slowly, and would gladly, to gain time, have found some fault with the place. But the sun was sufficiently high to give no advantage to either. The ground was good, the spot well chosen. I could find no excuse to put off the man, and I was about to salute him and fall to work, when a thought crossed my mind.

"One moment!" I said. "Supposing I kill you, M. le Capitaine, what becomes of your errand here?"

"Don't trouble yourself," he answered, with a sneer — he had misread my slowness and hesitation. "It will not happen, Monsieur. And in any case the thought need not harass you. I have a lieutenant."

"Yes, but what of my mission?" I replied bluntly. "I have no lieutenant."

"You should have thought of that before you interfered with my boots," he retorted, with contempt.

"True," I said, overlooking his manner. "But better late than never. I am not sure, now I think of it, that my duty to Monseigneur will let me fight."

"You will swallow the blow?" he cried, spitting on the ground offensively. "*Diable!*" And the lieutenant, standing on one side with his hands behind him and his shoulders squared, laughed grimly.

"I have not made up my mind," I answered irresolutely.

"Well, *nom de Dieu!* make it up," the captain replied, with an ugly sneer. He took a swaggering step this way and that, playing his weapon. "I am afraid, Lieutenant, there will be no sport to-day," he continued, in a loud aside. "Our cock has but a chicken heart."

"Well!" I said coolly, "I do not know what to do. Certainly it is a fine day, and a fair piece of ground. And the sun stands well. But I have not much to gain by killing you, M. le Capitaine, and it might get me into an awkward fix. On the other hand, it would not hurt me to let you go."

"Indeed?" he said contemptuously, looking at me as I should look at a lacquey.

"No!" I replied. "For if you were to say that you had struck Gil de Berault, and left the ground with a whole skin, no one would believe you."

"Gil de Berault!" he exclaimed, frowning.

"Yes, Monsieur," I replied suavely. "At your service. You did not know my name?"

"I thought your name was De Barthe," he said. His voice sounded queerly; and he waited

for the answer with parted lips, and a shadow in his eyes which I had seen in men's eyes before.

"No," I said. "That was my mother's name. I took it for this occasion only."

His florid cheek lost a shade of its colour, and he bit his lips as he glanced at the lieutenant, trouble in his eyes. I had seen these signs before, and knew them, and I might have cried "Chicken-heart!" in my turn; but I had not made a way of escape for him — before I declared myself — for nothing, and I held to my purpose. "I think you will allow now," I said grimly, "that it will not harm me even if I put up with a blow!"

"M. de Berault's courage is known," he muttered.

"And with reason," I said. "That being so, suppose we say this day three months, M. le Capitaine? The postponement to be for my convenience."

He caught the lieutenant's eye, and looked down sullenly, the conflict in his mind as plain as daylight. He had only to insist, and I must fight; and if by luck or skill he could master me, his fame as a duellist would run, like a ripple over

water, through every garrison town in France and make him a name even in Paris. On the other side were the imminent peril of death, the gleam of cold steel already in fancy at his breast, the loss of life and sunshine, and the possibility of a retreat with honour, if without glory. I read his face, and knew before he spoke what he would do.

"It appears to me that the burden is with you," he said huskily; "but for my part, I am satisfied."

"Very well," I said, "I take the burden. Permit me to apologize for having caused you to strip unnecessarily. Fortunately the sun is shining."

"Yes," he said gloomily. And he took his clothes from the sundial, and began to put them on. He had expressed himself satisfied; but I knew that he was feeling very ill-satisfied with himself, and I was not surprised when he presently said abruptly and almost rudely, "There is one thing I think we must settle here."

"What is that?" I asked.

"Our positions," he blurted out. "Or we shall cross one another again within the hour."

"Umph! I am not quite sure that I understand," I said.

"That is precisely what I don't do — understand!" he retorted, in a tone of surly triumph. "Before I came on this duty, I was told that there was a gentleman here, bearing sealed orders from the Cardinal to arrest M. de Cocheforêt; and I was instructed to avoid collision with him so far as might be possible. At first I took you for the gentleman. But the plague take me if I understand the matter now."

"Why not?" I said coldly.

"Because — well, the matter is in a nutshell!" he answered impetuously. "Are you here on behalf of Madame de Cocheforêt to shield her husband? Or are you here to arrest him? That is what I don't understand, M. de Berault."

"If you mean, am I the Cardinal's agent — I am!" I answered sternly.

"To arrest M. de Cocheforêt?"

"To arrest M. de Cocheforêt."

"Well — you surprise me," he said.

Only that; but he spoke so drily that I felt the blood rush to my face. "Take care, Mon-

sieur," I said severely. "Do not presume too far on the inconvenience to which your death might put me."

He shrugged his shoulders. "No offence!" he said. "But you do not seem, M. de Berault, to comprehend the difficulty. If we do not settle things now, we shall be bickering twenty times a day!"

"Well, what do you want?" I asked impatiently.

"Simply to know how you are going to proceed. So that our plans may not clash."

"But surely, M. le Capitaine, that is my affair!" I replied.

"The clashing?" he answered bitterly. Then he waved aside my wrath. "Pardon," he said, "the point is simply this: How do you propose to find him if he is here?"

"That again is my affair," I answered.

He threw up his hands in despair; but in a moment his place was taken by an unexpected disputant. The lieutenant, who had stood by all the time, listening and tugging at his grey moustache, suddenly spoke. "Look here, M.

de Berault," he said, confronting me roughly, "I do not fight duels. I am from the ranks. I proved my courage at Montauban in '21, and my honour is good enough to take care of itself. So I say what I like, and I ask you plainly what M. le Capitaine doubtless has in his mind but does not ask: Are you running with the hare and hunting with the hounds in this matter? In other words, have you thrown up Monseigneur's commission in all but name and become Madame's ally; or — it is the only other alternative — are you getting at the man through the women?"

"You villain!" I cried, glaring at him in such a rage and fury I could scarcely get the words out. This was plain speaking with a vengeance! "How dare you! How dare you say that I am false to the hand that pays me?"

I thought he would blench, but he did not. He stood up stiff as a poker. "I do not say; I ask!" he replied, facing me squarely, and slapping his fist into his open hand to drive home his words the better. "I ask you whether you are playing the traitor to the Cardinal?

Or to these two women? It is a simple question."

I fairly choked. "You impudent scoundrel," I said.

"Steady, steady!" he replied. "Pitch sticks where it belongs. But that is enough. I see which it is, M. le Capitaine; this way a moment, by your leave."

And in a very cavalier way he took his officer by the arm, and drew him into a side-walk, leaving me to stand in the sun, bursting with anger and spleen. The gutter-bred rascal! That such a man should insult me, and with impunity! In Paris I might have made him fight, but here it was impossible. I was still foaming with rage when they returned.

"We have come to a determination," the lieutenant said, tugging his grey mustachios and standing like a ramrod. "We shall leave you the house and Madame, and you can take your line to find the man. For ourselves, we shall draw off our men to the village, and we shall take our line. That is all, M. le Capitaine, is it not?"

"I think so," the captain muttered, looking anywhere but at me.

"Then we bid you good-day, Monsieur," the lieutenant added. And in a moment he turned his companion round, and the two retired up the walk to the house, leaving me to look after them in a black fit of rage and incredulity. At the first flush there was something so offensive in the manner of their going that anger had the upper hand. I thought of the lieutenant's words, and I cursed him to hell with a sickening consciousness that I should not forget them in a hurry: "Was I playing the traitor to the Cardinal or to these women — which?" *Mon Dieu!* if ever question — but there! some day I would punish him. And the captain? I could put an end to his amusement, at any rate; and I would. Doubtless among the country bucks of Auch he lorded it as a chief provincial bully, but I would cut his comb for him some fine morning behind the barracks.

And then, as I grew cooler I began to wonder why they were going, and what they were going to do. They might be already on the track, or

have the information they required under hand; in that case I could understand the movement. But if they were still searching vaguely, uncertain whether their quarry were in the neighbourhood or not, and uncertain how long they might have to stay, it seemed incredible that soldiers should move from good quarters to bad without motive.

I wandered down the garden thinking sullenly of this, and pettishly cutting off the heads of the flowers with my sheathed sword. After all, if they found and arrested the man, what then? I should have to make my peace with the Cardinal as I best might. He would have gained his point, but not through me, and I should have to look to myself. On the other hand, if I anticipated them — and, as a fact, I felt that I could lay my hand on the fugitive within a few hours — there would come a time when I must face Mademoiselle.

A little while back that had not seemed so difficult a thing. From the day of our first meeting — and in a higher degree since that afternoon when she had lashed me with her

scorn — my views of her, and my feelings towards her, had been strangely made up of antagonism and sympathy; of repulsion, because in her past and present she was so different from me; of yearning, because she was a woman and friendless. Then I had duped her and bought her confidence by returning the jewels, and in a measure I had sated my vengeance; and then, as a consequence, sympathy had again begun to get the better, until now I hardly knew my own mind or what I intended. *I did not know*, in fact, what I intended. I stood there in the garden with that conviction suddenly new-born in my mind; and then, in a moment, I heard her step and turned to find her behind me.

Her face was like April, smiles breaking through her tears. As she stood with a tall hedge of sunflowers behind her, I started to see how beautiful she was. "I am here in search of you, M. de Barthe," she said, colouring slightly, perhaps because my eyes betrayed my thought, "to thank you. You have not fought, and yet you have conquered. My woman has just been with me, and she tells me that they are going!"

"Going?" I said. "Yes, Mademoiselle, they are leaving the house."

She did not understand my reservation. "What magic have you used?" she said, almost gaily — it was wonderful how hope had changed her. "Moreover, I am curious to learn how you managed to avoid fighting."

"After taking a blow?" I said bitterly.

"Monsieur, I did not mean that," she said reproachfully. But her face clouded. I saw that, viewed in this light — in which I suppose she had not seen it — the matter perplexed her still more.

I took a sudden resolution. "Have you ever heard, Mademoiselle," I said gravely, plucking off while I spoke the dead leaves from a plant beside me, "of a gentleman by name De Berault? Known in Paris, so I have heard, by the sobriquet of the Black Death?"

"The duellist?" she answered, in wonder. "Yes, I have heard of him. He killed a young gentleman of this province at Nancy two years back. It was a sad story," she continued, shuddering, "of a dreadful man. God keep our friends from such!"

"Amen!" I said quietly. But, in spite of myself, I could not meet her eyes.

"Why?" she answered, quickly taking alarm at my silence. "What of him, M. de Barthe? Why have you mentioned him?"

"Because he is here, Mademoiselle."

"Here?" she exclaimed.

"Yes, Mademoiselle," I answered soberly. "I am he.'

CHAPTER IX.

CLON.

"You!" she cried, in a voice which pierced me. "You — M. de Berault? Impossible!" But, glancing askance at her, — I could not face her, — I saw that the blood had left her cheeks.

"Yes, Mademoiselle," I answered, in a low voice. "De Barthe was my mother's name. When I came here, a stranger, I took it that I might not be known; that I might again speak to a good woman and not see her shrink. That — but why trouble you with all this?" I continued proudly, rebelling against her silence, her turned shoulder, her averted face. "You asked me, Mademoiselle, how I could take a blow and let the striker go. I have answered. It is the one privilege M. de Berault possesses."

"Then," she replied quickly, but almost in a

whisper, "if I were M. de Berault, I would use it, and never fight again."

"In that event, Mademoiselle," I answered cynically, "I should lose my men friends as well as my women friends. Like Monseigneur, the Cardinal, I rule by fear"

She shuddered, either at the name or at the idea my words called up, and, for a moment, we stood awkwardly silent. The shadow of the sundial fell between us; the garden was still; here and there a leaf fluttered slowly down, or a seed fell. With each instant of silence I felt the gulf between us growing wider, I felt myself growing harder; I mocked at her past, which was so unlike mine; I mocked at mine, and called it fate. I was on the point of turning from her with a bow — and a furnace in my breast — when she spoke.

"There is a late rose lingering there," she said, a slight tremor in her voice. "I cannot reach it. Will you pluck it for me, M. de Berault?"

I obeyed her, my hand trembling, my face on fire. She took the rose from me, and placed

it in the bosom of her dress. And I saw that her hand trembled too, and that her cheek was dark with blushes.

She turned at once, and began to walk towards the house. Presently she spoke. "Heaven forbid that I should misjudge you a second time!" she said, in a low voice. "And, after all, who am I that I should judge you at all? An hour ago, I would have killed that man had I possessed the power."

"You repented, Mademoiselle," I said huskily. I could scarcely speak.

"Do you never repent?"

"Yes. But too late, Mademoiselle."

"Perhaps it is never too late," she answered softly.

"Alas, when a man is dead—"

"You may rob a man of more than life!" she replied with energy, stopping me by a gesture. "If you have never robbed a man—or a woman—of honour! If you have never ruined boy or girl, M. de Berault! If you have never pushed another into the pit and gone by it yourself! If—but for murder? Listen. You may be a

Romanist, but I am a Huguenot, and have read. 'Thou shalt not kill!' it is written; and the penalty, 'By man shall thy blood be shed!' But, 'If you cause one of these little ones to offend, it were *better* for you that a mill-stone were hanged about your neck, and that you were cast into the depths of the sea.'"

"Mademoiselle, you are too merciful," I muttered.

"I need mercy myself," she answered, sighing. "And I have had few temptations. How do I know what you have suffered?"

"Or done!" I said, almost rudely.

"Where a man has not lied, nor betrayed, nor sold himself or others," she answered firmly, but in a low tone, "I think I can forgive all else. I can better put up with force," she added, smiling sadly, "than with fraud."

Ah, Dieu! I turned away my face that she might not see how it paled, how I winced; that she might not guess how her words, meant in mercy, stabbed me to the heart. And yet, then, for the first time, while viewing in all its depth and width the gulf which separated us, I was

not hardened; I was not cast back on myself. Her gentleness, her pity, her humility, softened me, while they convicted me. My God! How could I do that which I had come to do? How could I stab her in the tenderest part, how could I inflict on her that rending pang, how could I meet her eyes, and stand before her, a Caliban, a Judas, the vilest, lowest, basest thing she could conceive?

I stood, a moment, speechless and disordered; stunned by her words, by my thoughts — as I have seen a man stand when he has lost his all, his last, at the tables. Then I turned to her; and for an instant I thought that my tale was told already. I thought that she had pierced my disguise, for her face was aghast, stricken with sudden fear. Then I saw that she was not looking at me, but beyond me, and I turned quickly and saw a servant hurrying from the house to us. It was Louis. His face, it was, had frightened her. His eyes were staring, his hair waved, his cheeks were flabby with dismay. He breathed as if he had been running.

"What is it?" Mademoiselle cried, while he

was still some way off. "Speak, man. My sister? Is she—"

"Clon," he gasped.

The name changed her to stone. "Clon?" she muttered. "What of him?"

"In the village!" Louis panted, his tongue stuttering with terror. "They are flogging him! They are killing him, Mademoiselle! To make him tell!"

Mademoiselle grasped the sundial and leant against it, her face colourless, and, for an instant, I thought that she was fainting. "Tell?" I said mechanically. "But he cannot tell. He is dumb, man."

"They will make him guide them," Louis groaned, covering his ears with his shaking hands, his face like paper. "And his cries! Oh, Monsieur, go!" he continued, suddenly appealing to me, in a thrilling tone. "Save him. All through the wood I heard them. It was horrible! horrible!"

Mademoiselle uttered a low moan, and I turned to support her, thinking each second to see her fall. But with a sudden movement she straight-

ened herself, and, slipping by me, with eyes which seemed to see nothing, she started swiftly down the walk towards the meadow gate.

I ran after her, but, taken by surprise as I was, it was only by a great effort I reached the gate before her, and, thrusting myself in the road, barred the way. "Let me pass!" she panted fiercely, striving to thrust me on one side. "Out of my way, Sir! I am going to the village."

"You are not going to the village," I said sternly. "Go back to the house, Mademoiselle, and at once."

"My servant!" she wailed. "Let me go! Oh, let me go! Do you think I can rest here while they torture him? He cannot speak, and they —they—"

"Go back, Mademoiselle," I said, cutting her short, with decision. "You would only make matters worse! I will go myself, and what one man can do against many, I will! Louis, give your mistress your arm and take her to the house. Take her to Madame."

"But you will go?" she cried. Before I could stay her—I swear I would have done so if I

could — she raised my hand and carried it to her trembling lips. "You will go! Go and stop them! Stop them," she continued, in a tone which stirred my heart, "and Heaven reward you, Monsieur!"

I did not answer; nor did I once look back, as I crossed the meadow; but I did not look forward either. Doubtless it was grass I trod; doubtless the wood was before me with the sun shining aslant on it, and behind me the house with a flame here and there on the windows. But I went in a dream, among shadows; with a racing pulse, in a glow from head to heel; conscious of nothing but the touch of Mademoiselle's warm lips, seeing neither meadows nor house, nor even the dark fringe of wood before me, but only Mademoiselle's passionate face. For the moment I was drunk: drunk with that to which I had been so long a stranger, with that which a man may scorn for years, to find it at last beyond his reach — drunk with the touch of a good woman's lips.

I passed the bridge in this state; and my feet were among the brushwood before the heat and fervour in which I moved found on a sudden

their direction. Something began to penetrate to my veiled senses — a hoarse inarticulate cry, now deep, now shrilling horribly, which seemed to fill the wood. It came at intervals of half a minute or so, and made the flesh creep, it was so full of dumb pain, of impotent wrestling, of unspeakable agony. I am a man and have seen things. I saw the Concini beheaded, and Chalais ten years later — they gave him thirty-four blows; and when I was a boy I escaped from the college and viewed from a great distance Ravaillac torn by horses — that was in the year ten. But the horrible cries I now heard filled me, perhaps because I was alone and fresh from the sight of Mademoiselle, with loathing that was intense. The very wood, though the sun wanted an hour of setting, seemed to grow dark. I ran on through it, cursing, until the hovels of the village at length came in sight. Again the shriek rose, a pulsing horror, and this time I could hear the lash fall on the sodden flesh, I could see in fancy the strong man, trembling, quivering, straining against his bonds. And then, in a moment, I was in the street, and, as the scream once more tore

the air, I dashed round the corner by the inn, and came upon them.

I did not look at *him*. I saw Captain Larolle and the lieutenant, and a ring of troopers, and one man, bare-armed, teasing out with his fingers the thongs of a whip. The thongs dripped blood, and the sight fired the mine. The rage I had suppressed when the lieutenant bearded me earlier in the afternoon, the passion with which Mademoiselle's distress had filled my breast, at last found vent. I sprang through the line of soldiers, and striking the man with the whip a buffet between the shoulders, which hurled him breathless to the ground, I turned on the leaders. "You devils!" I cried. "Shame on you! The man is dumb! I tell you, if I had ten men with me, I would sweep you and your scum out of the village with broomsticks. Lay on another lash," I continued recklessly, "and I will see if you or the Cardinal be the stronger."

The lieutenant glared at me, his grey moustache bristling, his eyes almost starting from his head. Some of the troopers laid their hands on their swords, but no one moved, and only the captain

spoke. "*Mille diables!*" he swore. "What is all this about? Are you mad, Sir?"

"Mad or sane!" I cried, still in a fury. "Lay on another lash, and you shall repent it."

"I?"

"Yes, you!"

For an instant there was a pause of astonishment. Then to my surprise the captain laughed — laughed loudly. "Very heroic!" he said. "Quite magnificent, M. le Chevalier-errant. But you see, unfortunately, you come too late!"

"Too late!" I said incredulously.

"Yes, too late," he replied, with a mocking smile. And the lieutenant grinned too. "You see the man has just confessed. We have only been giving him an extra touch or two, to impress his memory, and save us the trouble of tying him up again."

"I don't believe it," I said bluntly — but I felt the check, and fell to earth. "The man cannot speak."

"No, but he has managed to tell us that he will guide us to the place we want," the captain answered drily. "The whip, if it cannot find a

man a tongue, can find him wits. What is more, I think, he will keep his word," he continued, with a hideous smile. "For I warn him that if he does not, all your heroics shall not save him! He is a rebel dog, and known to us of old, and I will flay his back to the bones — ay, until we can see his heart beating through his ribs — but I will have what I want — in your teeth, too, you d—d meddler."

"Steady, steady!" I said, somewhat sobered. I saw that he was telling me the truth. "He is going to take you to M. de Cocheforêt's hiding-place, is he?"

"Yes, he is!" the captain retorted offensively. "Have you any objection to make to that, Master Spy?"

"None," I replied. "But I shall go with you. And if you live three months, I shall kill you for that name — behind the barracks at Auch, M. le Capitaine."

He changed colour, but he answered me boldly enough. "I don't know that you will go with us. That is as we please," he continued, with a snarl.

"I have the Cardinal's orders," I said sternly.

"The Cardinal?" he exclaimed, stung to fury by this repetition of the name. "The Cardinal be—"

But the lieutenant laid his hands on his lips, and stopped him. "Hush!" he said. Then more quietly, "Your pardon, M. le Capitaine. Shall I give orders to the men to fall in?"

The captain nodded sullenly.

"Take him down!" the lieutenant ordered, in his harsh, monotonous voice. "Throw his blouse over him, and tie his hands. And do you two, Paul and Lebrun, guard him. Michel, bring the whip, or he may forget how it tastes. Sergeant, choose four good men and dismiss the rest to their quarters."

"Shall we need the horses?" the sergeant asked.

"I don't know," the captain answered peevishly. "What does the rogue say?"

The lieutenant stepped up to him. "Listen!" he said grimly. "Nod if you mean yes, and shake your head if you mean no. And have a care you answer truly. Is it more than a mile to this place? The place you know of?"

They had loosened the poor wretch's fastenings, and covered his back. He stood leaning against the wall, his mouth still panting, the sweat running down his hollow cheeks; his sunken eyes were closed; a quiver now and again ran through his frame. The lieutenant repeated his question, and, getting no answer, looked round for orders. The captain met the look, and crying savagely, "Answer, will you, you mute!" struck the half-swooning miserable across the back with his switch. The effect was magical. Covered, as his shoulders were, the man sprang erect with a shriek of pain, raising his chin, and hollowing his back; and in that attitude stood an instant with starting eyes, gasping for breath. Then he sank back against the wall, moving his mouth spasmodically. His face was the colour of lead.

"*Diable!* I think we have gone too far with him!" the captain muttered.

"Bring some wine!" the lieutenant replied. "Quick with it!"

I looked on, burning with indignation, and wondering besides what would come of this. If

the man took them to the place, and they succeeded in seizing Cocheforêt, there was an end of the matter as far as I was concerned. It was off my shoulders, and I might leave the village when I pleased; nor was it likely — since he would have his man, though not through me — that the Cardinal would refuse me an amnesty. On the whole, I thought that I would prefer that things should take that course; and assuming the issue, I began to wonder whether in that event it would be necessary that Madame should know the truth. I had a kind of a vision of a reformed Berault, dead to play and purging himself at a distance from Zaton's, winning, perhaps, a name in the Italian war, and finally — but, pshaw! I was a fool.

However, be that as it might, it was essential that I should see the arrest made; and I waited patiently while they revived the tortured man, and made their dispositions. These took some time; so that the sun was down, and it was growing dusk, when we marched out, Clon going first, supported by his two guards, the captain and I following, — abreast, and eyeing one another sus-

piciously,—the lieutenant, with the sergeant and five troopers, bringing up the rear. Clon moved slowly, moaning from time to time, and but for the aid given him by the two men with him, must have sunk down again and again.

He went out between two houses close to the inn, and struck a narrow track, scarcely discernible, which ran behind other houses, and then plunged into the thickest part of the wood. A single person, traversing the covert, might have made such a track; or pigs, or children. But it was the first idea that occurred to us, and it put us all on the alert. The captain carried a cocked pistol, I held my sword drawn, and kept a watchful eye on him; and the deeper the dusk fell in the wood, the more cautiously we went, until at last we came out with a sort of jump into a wider and lighter path.

I looked up and down it, and saw before me a wooden bridge, and an open meadow, lying cold and grey in the twilight; and I stood in astonishment. It was the old path to the Château! I shivered at the thought that he was going to take us there, to the house—to Mademoiselle!

The captain also recognised the place, and swore aloud. But the dumb man went on unheeding, until he reached the wooden bridge. There he paused as if in doubt, and looked towards the dark outline of the building, which was just visible, one faint light twinkling sadly in the west wing. As the captain and I pressed up behind him, he raised his hands and seemed to wring them towards the house.

"Have a care!" the captain growled. "Play me no tricks, or —" But he did not finish the sentence; for Clon turned back from the bridge, and, entering the wood on the left hand, began to ascend the bank of the stream. We had not gone a hundred yards before the ground grew rough, and the undergrowth thick; and yet through all ran a kind of path which enabled us to advance, dark as it was growing. Very soon the bank on which we moved began to rise above the water, and grew steep and rugged. We turned a shoulder, where the stream swept round a curve, and saw we were in the mouth of a small ravine, dark and steep-walled. The water brawled along the bottom, over boulders

and through chasms. In front, the slope on which we stood shaped itself into a low cliff; but half-way between its summit and the water, a ledge, or narrow terrace, running along the face, was dimly visible.

"Ten to one, a cave!" the captain muttered. "It is a likely place."

"And an ugly one!" I sneered. "Which one to ten might safely hold for hours!"

"If the ten had no pistols — yes!" he answered viciously. "But you see we have. Is he going that way?"

He was. "Lieutenant," Larolle said, turning and speaking in a low voice, though the chafing of the stream below us covered ordinary sounds, "shall we light the lanthorns, or press on while there is still a glimmering of day?"

"On, I should say, M. le Capitaine," the lieutenant answered. "Prick him in the back if he falters. I will warrant he has a tender place or two!" the brute added, with a chuckle.

The captain gave the word, and we moved forward; it being very evident now that the cliff-path was our destination. It was possible

for the eye to follow the track all the way to it through rough stones and brushwood; and though Clon climbed feebly and with many groans, two minutes saw us step on to it. It did not turn out to be the perilous place it looked at a distance. The ledge, grassy and terrace-like, sloped slightly downwards and outwards, and in parts was slippery; but it was as wide as a highway, and the fall to the water did not exceed thirty feet. Even in such a dim light as now displayed it to us, and by increasing the depth and unseen dangers of the gorge, gave a kind of impressiveness to our movements, a nervous woman need not have feared to breast it. I wondered how often Mademoiselle had passed along it with her milk-pitcher.

"I think we have him now!" Captain Larolle muttered, twisting his mustachios, and looking round to make his last dispositions. "Paul and Lebrun, see that your man makes no noise. Sergeant, come forward with your carbine, but do not fire without orders. Now, silence, all, and close up, Lieutenant. Forward!"

We advanced about a hundred paces, keeping

the cliff on our left, then turned a shoulder, and saw, a few paces in front of us, a black blotch standing out from the grey duskiness of the cliff-side. The prisoner stopped, and raising his bound hands pointed to it.

"There?" the captain whispered, pressing forward. "Is that the place?"

Clon nodded. The captain's voice shook with excitement. "You two remain here with him!" he muttered, in a low tone. "Sergeant, come forward with me. Now, are you ready? Forward!"

He and the sergeant passed quickly, one on either side of Clon and his guards. The path was narrow here, and the captain passed outside. The eyes of all but one were on the black blotch, the hollow in the cliff-side, and no one saw exactly what happened. But somehow, as the captain passed abreast of him, the prisoner thrust back his guards, and springing sideways, flung his unbound arms round Larolle's body, and in an instant swept him, shouting, to the verge of the precipice.

It was done in a moment. By the time the

lieutenant's startled wits and eyes were back, the two were already tottering on the edge, looking in the gloom like one dark form. The sergeant, who was the first to find his head, levelled his carbine; but as the wrestlers twirled and twisted, the captain shrieking out oaths and threats, the mute silent as death, it was impossible to see which was which; and the sergeant lowered his gun again, while the men held back nervously. The ledge sloped steeply there; the edge was vague; already the two seemed to be wrestling in mid-air, — and the mute was a man beyond hope or fear.

That moment of hesitation was fatal. Clon's long arms were round the other's arms, crushing them into his ribs; Clon's skull-like face grinned hate into the other's eyes; his long limbs curled round him like the folds of a snake. Suddenly Larolle's strength gave way. "Damn you all! Why don't you — Mercy! mercy!" came in a last scream from his lips; and then, as the lieutenant, taken aback before, sprang forward to his aid, the two toppled over the edge, and in a second hurtled out of sight.

"*Mon Dieu!*" the lieutenant cried, in horror. The answer was a dull splash in the depths below.

He flung up his arms. "Water!" he said. "Quick, men, get down! We may save him yet! They have fallen into water!"

But there was no path, and night was come, and the men's nerves were shaken. The lanthorns had to be lit, and the way to be retraced; and by the time we reached the dark pool which lay below, the last bubbles were gone from the surface, the last ripples had beaten themselves out against the banks. True, the pool still rocked sullenly, and the yellow light showed a man's hat floating, and near it a glove three parts submerged. But that was all. The mute's dying grip had known no loosening, nor his hate any fear. Later, I heard that when they dragged the two out next day, his fingers were in the other's eye-sockets, his teeth in his throat. If ever man found death sweet, it was he.

As we turned slowly from the black water, some shuddering, some crossing themselves, the lieutenant looked vengefully at me. "Curse

you!" he said, in sudden fury. "I believe you are glad!"

"He deserved his fate," I answered coldly. "Why should I pretend to be sorry? It was now or in three months. And for the other poor devil's sake I am glad."

He glared at me a moment, in speechless anger. At last, "I should like to have you tied up!" he said, between his teeth.

"I should have thought that you had had enough of tying up for one day!" I retorted. "But there; it comes of making officers out of the canaille. Dogs love blood. The teamster must still lash something, if he can no longer lash his horses."

We were back, a sombre little procession, at the wooden bridge, when I said this. He stopped suddenly. "Very well," he replied, nodding viciously. "That decides me. Sergeant, light me this way with a lanthorn. The rest of you to the village. Now, Master Spy," he continued, glancing at me with gloomy spite, "your road is my road. I think I know how to cook your goose."

I shrugged my shoulders in disdain, and to-

gether, the sergeant leading the way with the light, we crossed the meadow, and passed through the gate where Mademoiselle had kissed my hand, and up the ghostly walk between the rose-bushes. I wondered uneasily what the lieutenant would be at, and what he intended; but the lanthorn light which now fell on the ground at our feet, and now showed one of us to the other, high-lit in a frame of blackness, discovered nothing in his grizzled face but settled hostility. He wheeled at the end of the walk to go to the main door; but as he did so, I saw the flutter of a white skirt by the stone seat against the house, and I stepped that way. "Mademoiselle," I said softly, "is it you?"

"Clon?" she muttered, her voice quivering. "What of him?"

"He is past pain," I answered gently. "He is dead, but in his own way. Take comfort, Mademoiselle." And then before I could say more, the lieutenant with his sergeant and light were at my elbow. He saluted Mademoiselle roughly. She looked at him with shuddering abhorrence.

"Are you come to flog me, Sir?" she said icily. "Is it not enough that you have murdered my servant?"

"On the contrary, it was he killed my captain," the lieutenant answered, in another tone than I had expected. "If your servant is dead, so is my comrade."

She looked with startled eyes, not at him, but at me. "What! Captain Larolle?" she muttered.

I nodded.

"How?" she asked.

"Clon flung the captain and himself into the river-pool," I explained, in a low voice. "The pool above the bridge."

She uttered an exclamation of awe, and stood silent. But her lips moved; I think she was praying for Clon, though she was a Huguenot. Meanwhile I had a fright. The lanthorn, swinging in the sergeant's hand, and now throwing its smoky light on the stone seat, now on the rough wall above it, showed me something else. On the seat, doubtless where Mademoiselle's hand had lain, as she sat in the dark, listening and watching, stood a pitcher of food. Beside her, in

that place, it was damning evidence. I trembled lest the lieutenant's eye should fall upon it, lest the sergeant should see it; I thought what I could do to hide it; and then in a moment I forgot all about it. The lieutenant was speaking, and his voice was like doom. My throat grew dry as I listened. My tongue stuck to my mouth; I tried to look at Mademoiselle, but I could not.

"It is true, the captain is gone," he said stiffly. "But others are alive, and about one of them, a word with you, — by your leave, Mademoiselle. I have listened to a good deal of talk from this fine gentleman friend of yours. He has spent the last twenty-four hours saying, 'You shall!' and 'You shall not!' He came from you, and took a very high tone because we laid a little whip-lash about that dumb devil of yours. He called us brutes and beasts, and but for him I am not sure that my friend would not be alive. But when he said a few minutes ago that he was glad, — glad of it, damn him! — then I fixed it in my mind that I would be even with him. And I am going to be!"

"What do you mean?" Mademoiselle asked, wearily interrupting him. "If you think you can prejudice me against that gentleman —"

"That is precisely what I do think! And I am going to do it. And a little more than that!"

"You will be only wasting your breath!" she answered proudly.

"Wait! wait, Mademoiselle, until you have heard!" he said. "If ever a black-hearted scoundrel, a dastardly, sneaking spy, trod the earth, it is this fellow! This friend of yours! And I am going to expose him. Your own eyes and your own ears shall persuade you. Why, I would not eat, I would not drink, I would not sit down with him! I would not! I would rather be beholden to the meanest trooper in my squadron than to him! Ay, I would, so help me Heaven!" And the lieutenant, turning squarely on his heels, spat on the ground.

CHAPTER X.

THE ARREST.

So it had come! And come in such a fashion that I saw no way of escape. The sergeant was between us, and I could not strike him. And I found no words. A score of times I had thought with shrinking how I should reveal my secret to Mademoiselle, what I should say, and how she would take it. But in my mind it had always been a voluntary act, this disclosure. It had been always I who had unmasked myself, and she who listened — alone; and in this voluntariness and this privacy there had been something which seemed to take from the shame of anticipation. But here — here was no voluntary act on my part, no privacy, nothing but shame. I stood mute, convicted, speechless — like the thing I was.

Yet if anything could have braced me, it was

Mademoiselle's voice, when she answered him. "Go on, Monsieur," she said, with the perfect calmness of scorn. "You will have done the sooner."

"You do not believe me?" he replied hotly. "Then, I say, look at him! Look at him! If ever shame —"

"Monsieur!" she said abruptly — she did not look at me. "I am ashamed myself!"

"Why, his very name is not his own!" the lieutenant rejoined jerkily. "He is no Barthe at all. He is Berault the gambler, the duellist, the bully —"

Again she interrupted him. "I know it," she said coldly. "I know it all. And if you have nothing more to tell me, go, Monsieur. Go!" she continued, in a tone of infinite scorn. "Enough that you have earned my contempt as well as my abhorrence!"

He looked for a moment taken aback. Then, "Ay, but I *have* more!" he cried, his voice stubbornly triumphant. "I forgot that you would think little of that! I forgot that a swordsman has always the ladies' hearts. But I have more.

Do you know, too, that he is in the Cardinal's pay? Do you know that he is here on the same errand which brings us here, — to arrest M. de Cocheforêt? Do you know that while we go about the business openly and in soldier fashion, it is his part to worm himself into your confidence, to sneak into Madame's intimacy, to listen at your door, to follow your footsteps, to hang on your lips, to track you — track you until you betray yourselves and the man? Do you know this, and that all his sympathy is a lie, Mademoiselle? His help, so much bait to catch the secret? His aim, blood-money — blood-money? Why, *morbleu!*" the lieutenant continued, pointing his finger at me, and so carried away by passion, so lifted out of himself by wrath and indignation, that in spite of myself I shrank before him, — "you talk, lady, of contempt and abhorrence in the same breath with me! But what have you for him? What have you for him, the spy, the informer, the hired traitor? And if you doubt, if you want evidence, look at him. Only look at him, I say!"

And he might well say it! For I stood silent

still; cowering and despairing, white with rage and hate. But Mademoiselle did not look. She gazed straight at the lieutenant. "Have you done?" she said.

"Done?" he stammered. Her words, her air, brought him to earth again. "Done? Yes, if you believe me."

"I do not," she answered proudly. "If that be all, be satisfied, Monsieur. I do not believe you."

"Then tell me," he retorted, after a moment of stunned surprise, "why, if he was not on our side, do you think we let him remain here? Why did we suffer him to stay in a suspected house bullying us, and taking your part from hour to hour?"

"He has a sword, Monsieur," she answered, with fine contempt.

"*Mille diables!*" he cried, snapping his fingers in a rage. "That for his sword! No. It was because he held the Cardinal's commission; because he had equal authority with us; because we had no choice."

"And that being so, Monsieur, why are you now betraying him?" she asked keenly.

He swore at that, feeling the stroke go home. "You must be mad," he said, glaring at her. "Mad, if you cannot see that the man is what I tell you he is. Look at him! Listen to him! Has he a word to say for himself?"

Still she did not look. "It is late," she replied, coldly and irrelevantly. "And I am not very well. If you have quite done, perhaps you will leave me, Monsieur."

"*Mon Dieu!*" he exclaimed, shrugging his shoulders; "you *are* mad! I have told you the truth, and you will not believe it. Well, on your head be it then, Mademoiselle. I have no more to say. But you will see."

He looked at her for a moment as if he thought that she might still give way; then he saluted her roughly, gave the word to the sergeant, turned, and went down the path. The sergeant went after him, the lanthorn swaying in his hand. We two were left alone in the gloom. The frogs were croaking in the pool; the house, the garden, the wood, — all lay quiet under the darkness, as on the night when I first came to the Château.

And would to Heaven I had never come! That was the cry in my heart. Would to Heaven I had never seen this woman, whose nobility and faith and singleness were a continual shame to me; a reproach, branding me every hour I stood in her presence, with all vile and hateful names. The man just gone, coarse, low-bred, brutal soldier as he was, man-flogger, and drilling-block, had yet found heart to feel my baseness, and words in which to denounce it. What, then, would she say when the truth some day came home to her? What shape should I take in her eyes then? How should I be remembered through all the years — then?

Then? But now? What was she thinking, now, as she stood, silent and absorbed, by the stone seat, a shadowy figure with face turned from me? Was she recalling the man's words, fitting them to the facts and the past, adding this and that circumstance? Was she, though she had rebuffed him in the body, collating, now he was gone, all he had said, and out of these scraps piecing together the damning truth? The thought tortured me. I could brook un-

certainty no longer. I went nearer to her and touched her sleeve. "Mademoiselle," I said, in a voice which sounded hoarse and forced even in my own ears, "do you believe this of me?"

She started violently and turned. "Pardon, Monsieur," she answered. "I had forgotten that you were here. Do I believe — what?"

"What that man said of me," I muttered.

"That!" she exclaimed; and she stood a moment gazing at me in a strange fashion. "Do I believe what he said, Monsieur! But come, come," she continued, "and I will show you if I believe it. But not here."

She led the way on the instant into the house, going in through the parlour door, which stood half open. The room inside was pitch dark, but she took me fearlessly by the hand, and led me quickly through it, and along the passage, until we came to the cheerful lighted hall, where a great fire burned on the hearth. All traces of the soldiers' occupation had been swept away. But the room was empty.

She led me to the fire, and there, in the full light, no longer a shadowy creature, but red-

lipped, brilliant, throbbing with life, she stood opposite me, her eyes shining, her colour high, her breast heaving. "Do I believe it?" she said. "I will tell you. M. de Cocheforêt's hiding-place is in the hut behind the fern-stack, two furlongs beyond the village, on the road to Auch. You know now what no one else knows, he and I and Madame excepted. You hold in your hands his life and my honour; and you know also, M. de Berault, whether I believed that tale."

"My God!" I cried. And I stood looking at her, until something of the horror in my eyes crept into hers, and she shuddered and stepped back.

"What is it? What is it?" she whispered, clasping her hands. And with all the colour gone from her cheeks she peered trembling into the corners and towards the door. "There is no one here. Is there any one — listening?"

I forced myself to speak, though I shook all over, like a man in an ague. "No, Mademoiselle, there is no one here," I muttered. And then I let my head fall on my breast, and I stood before her, the statue of despair. Had she felt a

grain of suspicion, a grain of doubt, my bearing must have opened her eyes. But her mind was cast in so noble a mould, that having once thought ill of me and been converted, she could feel no doubt again. It was her nature to trust all in all. So, a little recovered from her fright, she stood looking at me in great wonder; and at last she had a thought.

"You are not well?" she said suddenly. "It is your old wound, Monsieur."

"Yes, Mademoiselle," I muttered faintly. "It is my old wound."

"I will call Clon!" she cried impetuously. And then, with a sob, "Ah! poor Clon! He is gone. But there is Louis. I will call him, and he will get you something."

She was gone from the room before I could stop her; and I was left leaning against the table, possessor at last of the great secret which I had come so far to win. Possessor of that secret, and able in a moment to open the door, and go out into the night, and make use of it — and yet the most unhappy of men. The sweat stood on my brow, my eyes wandered round the

room; I even turned towards the door, with some mad thought of flight — flight from her, from the house, from everything. And God knows if I might not have chosen that course; for I still stood doubting, when on the door, that door, there came a sudden hurried knocking which jarred every nerve in my body. I started. I stood in the middle of the floor, gazing at the door, as at a ghost. Then glad of action, glad of anything that might relieve the tension of my feelings, I strode to it, and pulled it sharply open.

On the threshold, his flushed face lit up by the light behind me, stood one of the knaves I had brought with me to Auch. He had been running, and panted heavily, but he had kept his wits. He grasped my sleeve instantly. "Ah! Monsieur, the very man!" he cried, tugging at me. "Quick! come this instant, and you may yet be first. They have the secret. They have found Monsieur."

"Found whom?" I echoed. "M. de Cocheforêt?"

"No; but the place where he lies. It was

found by accident. The lieutenant was gathering his men to go to it when I came away. If we are quick, we may be there first."

"But the place?" I said.

"I could not hear where it was," he answered bluntly. "We can hang on their skirts, and at the last moment strike in."

The pair of pistols I had taken from the shock-headed man lay on a chest by the door. I snatched them up, and my hat, and joined him without another word; and in a moment we were running down the garden. I looked back once before we passed the gate, and I saw the light streaming out through the door which I had left open; and I fancied that for an instant a figure darkened the gap. But the fancy only strengthened the one single iron purpose which had taken possession of me and all my thoughts. I must be first. I must anticipate the lieutenant, and make the arrest myself. I ran on only the faster.

We seemed to be across the meadow and in the wood in a moment. There, instead of keeping along the common path, I boldly singled out

— my senses seemed preternaturally keen — the smaller track by which Clon had brought us, and ran unfaltering along it, avoiding logs and pitfalls as by instinct, and following all its turns and twists, until it brought us to the back of the inn, and we could hear the murmur of subdued voices in the village street, the sharp low words of command, and even the clink of weapons; and could see, above and between the houses, the dull glare of lanthorns and torches.

I grasped my man's arm and crouched down, listening. "Where is your mate?" I said, in his ear.

"With them," he muttered.

"Then come," I whispered, rising. "I have seen enough. Let us go."

But he caught me by the arm and detained me. "You don't know the way!" he hissed. "Steady, steady, Monsieur. You go too fast. They are just moving. Let us join them, and strike in when the time comes. We must let them guide us."

"Fool!" I said, shaking off his hand. "I tell you, I know where he is! I know where

they are going. Come; lose not a moment, and we will pluck the fruit while they are on the road to it."

His only answer was an exclamation of surprise; at that moment the lights began to move. The lieutenant was starting. The moon was not yet up; the sky was grey and cloudy; to advance where we were was to step into a wall of blackness. But we had lost too much time already, and I did not hesitate. Bidding my companion follow me, and use his legs, I sprang through a low fence which rose before us, and stumbling blindly over some broken ground in the rear of the houses, came, with a fall or two, to a little watercourse with steep sides. Through this I plunged recklessly, and up the farther side, and, breathless and panting, gained the road just beyond the village, and fifty yards in advance of the lieutenant's troop.

They had only two lanthorns burning now, and we were beyond the circle of light these cast; while the steady tramp of so many footsteps covered the noise we made. We were unnoticed. In a twinkling we turned our backs, and as fast

as we could ran down the road. Fortunately, they were thinking more of secrecy than speed, and in a minute we had doubled the distance between us; in two minutes their lights were mere sparks shining in the gloom behind us. We lost, at last, even the tramp of their feet. Then I began to look out and go more slowly; peering into the shadows on either side for the fern-stack.

On one hand the hill rose steeply; on the other it fell away to the stream. On neither side was close wood, — or my difficulties had been immensely increased, — but scattered oak-trees stood here and there among gorse and bracken. This helped me, and in a moment, on the upper side, I came upon the dense substance of the stack looming black against the lighter hill.

My heart beat fast, but it was no time for thought. Bidding the man in a whisper to follow me and be ready to back me up, I climbed the bank softly, and with a pistol in my hand, felt my way to the rear of the stack; thinking to find a hut there, set against the fern, and M. de Cocheforêt in it. But I found no hut. There was none; and all was so dark that it came upon me

suddenly as I stood between the hill and the stack that I had undertaken a very difficult thing. The hut behind the fern-stack? But how far behind? How far from it? The dark slope stretched above us, infinite, immeasurable, shrouded in night. To begin to climb it in search of a tiny hut, probably well-hidden and hard to find in daylight, seemed a task as impossible as to meet with the needle in the hay! And now, while I stood, chilled and doubting, the steps of the troop in the road began to grow audible, began to come nearer.

"Well, M. le Capitaine?" the man beside me muttered — in wonder why I stood. "Which way? Or they will be before us yet."

I tried to think, to reason it out; to consider where the hut would be; while the wind sighed through the oaks, and here and there I could hear an acorn fall. But the thing pressed too close on me: my thoughts would not be hurried, and at last I said at a venture, "Up the hill! Straight from the stack."

He did not demur, and we plunged at the ascent, knee deep in bracken and furze, sweat-

ing at every pore with our exertions, and hearing the troop come every moment nearer on the road below. Doubtless *they* knew exactly whither to go! Forced to stop and take breath when we had scrambled up fifty yards or so, I saw their lanthorns shining like moving glow-worms; and could even hear the clink of steel. For all I could tell, the hut might be down there, and we two be moving from it! But it was too late to go back now; they were close to the fern-stack: and in despair I turned to the hill again. A dozen steps, and I stumbled. I rose and plunged on again; again I stumbled. Then I found that I was no longer ascending. I was treading level earth. And — was it water I saw before me, below me, a little in front of my feet, or some mirage of the sky?

Neither; and I gripped my fellow's arm, as he came abreast of me, and stopped him sharply. Below us, in the centre of a steep hollow, a pit in the hill-side, a light shone out through some aperture and quivered on the mist, like the pale lamp of a moorland hobgoblin. It made itself visible, displaying nothing else; a wisp of light in the bottom of a black bowl.

Yet my spirits rose with a great bound at sight of it, for I knew that I had stumbled on the place I sought. In the common run of things I should have weighed my next step carefully, and gone about it slowly. But here was no place for thought, nor room for delay, and I slid down the side of the hollow, and the moment my feet touched the bottom, sprang to the door of the little hut whence the light issued. A stone turned under my foot in my rush, and I fell on my knees on the threshold; but the fall only brought my face to a level with the startled eyes of the man who lay inside on a bed of fern. He had been reading. At the sound I made he dropped his book, and stretched out his hand for a weapon. But the muzzle of my pistol covered him before he could reach his; he was not in a posture from which he could spring, and at a sharp word from me he dropped his hand. The tigerish glare which had flickered for an instant in his eyes, gave place to a languid smile; and he shrugged his shoulders. "*Eh, bien?*" he said, with marvellous composure. "Taken at last! Well, I was tired of it."

"You are my prisoner, M. de Cocheforêt," I answered.

"It seems so," he said.

"Move a hand, and I kill you," I answered. "But you have still a choice."

"Truly?" he said, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes. My orders are to take you to Paris alive or dead. Give me your parole that you will make no attempt to escape, and you shall go thither at your ease and as a gentleman. Refuse, and I shall disarm and bind you, and you will go as a prisoner."

"What force have you?" he asked curtly. He had not moved. He still lay on his elbow, his cloak covering him, the little Marot in which he had been reading close to his hand. But his quick, black eyes, which looked the keener for the pallor and thinness of his face, roved ceaselessly over me, probed the darkness behind me, took note of everything.

"Enough to compel you, Monsieur," I replied sternly. "But that is not all. There are thirty dragoons coming up the hill to secure you, and they will make you no such offer. Surrender

to me before they come and give me your parole, and I will do all for your comfort. Delay, and you will fall into their hands. There can be no escape."

"You will take my word," he said slowly.

"Give it, and you may keep your pistols, M. de Cocheforêt," I replied.

"Tell me at least that you are not alone."

"I am not alone."

"Then I give it," he said, with a sigh. "And for Heaven's sake get me something to eat and a bed. I am tired of this pig-sty — and this life *Arnidieu!* it is a fortnight since I slept between sheets."

"You shall sleep to-night in your own house if you please," I answered hurriedly. "But here they come. Be good enough to stay where you are a moment, and I will meet them."

I stepped out into the darkness, in the nick of time. The lieutenant, after posting his men round the hollow, had just slid down with a couple of sergeants to make the arrest. The place round the open door was pitch dark. He had not espied my knave, who had lodged

himself in the deepest shadow of the hut; and when he saw me come out across the light, he took me for Cocheforêt. In a twinkling he thrust a pistol into my face, and cried triumphantly, "You are my prisoner!" At the same instant one of the sergeants raised a lanthorn and threw its light into my eyes.

"What folly is this?" I said savagely.

The lieutenant's jaw fell, and he stood for half a minute, paralyzed with astonishment. Less than an hour before he had left me at the Château. Thence he had come hither with the briefest delay; and yet he found me here before him! He swore fearfully, his face dark, his mustachios stiff with rage. "What is this? What is it?" he cried at last. "Where is the man?"

"What man?" I said.

"This Cocheforêt!" he roared, carried away by his passion. "Don't lie to me! He is here, and I will have him!"

"You will not. You are too late!" I said, watching him heedfully. "M. de Cocheforêt is here, but he has already surrendered to me, and he is my prisoner."

"Your prisoner?"

"Yes, my prisoner!" I answered, facing the man with all the harshness I could muster. "I have arrested him by virtue of the Cardinal's special commission granted to me. And by virtue of the same I shall keep him!"

He glared at me for a moment in utter rage and perplexity. Then on a sudden I saw his face lighten. "It is a d—d ruse!" he shouted, brandishing his pistol like a madman. "It is a cheat and a fraud! And by G—d you have no commission! I see through it! I see through it all! You have come here, and you have hocussed us! You are of their side, and this is your last shift to save him!"

"What folly is this?" I exclaimed.

"No folly at all!" he answered, conviction in his tone. "You have played upon us! You have fooled us! But I see through it now! An hour ago I exposed you to that fine Madame at the house there, and I thought it a marvel that she did not believe me. I thought it a marvel that she did not see through you, when you stood there before her, confounded, tongue-

tied, a rogue convicted! But I understand it now. She knew you! By ——, she knew you! She was in the plot, and you were in the plot; and I, who thought I was opening her eyes, was the only one fooled! But it is my turn now. You have played a bold part, and a clever one, and I congratulate you! But," he continued, a sinister light in his little eyes, "it is at an end now, Monsieur! You took us in finely with your tale of Monseigneur, and his commission, and your commission, and the rest. But I am not to be blinded any longer, or bullied! You have arrested him, have you? *You* have arrested him! Well, by G—d, I shall arrest him, and I shall arrest you too!"

"You are mad!" I said, staggered as much by this new view of the matter as by his perfect conviction of its truth. "Mad, Lieutenant!"

"I was!" he snarled drily. "But I am sane now. I was mad when you imposed upon us; when you persuaded me that you were fooling the women to get the secret out of them, while all the time you were sheltering them, protecting them, aiding them, and hiding him—then I was

mad! But not now. However, I ask your pardon, M. de Barthe, or M. de Berault, or whatever your name really is. I ask your pardon. I thought you the cleverest sneak and the dirtiest hound heaven ever made, or hell refused! I find that you were cleverer than I thought, and an honest traitor. Your pardon."

One of the men who stood about the rim of the bowl above us laughed. I looked at the lieutenant, and could willingly have killed him. "*Mon Dieu!*" I said, so furious in my turn that I could scarcely speak. "Do you say that I am an impostor — that I do not hold the Cardinal's commission?"

"I do say that!" he answered coolly. "And shall abide by it."

"And that I belong to the rebel party?"

"I do," he replied, in the same tone. "In fact," with a grin, "I say that you are an honest man on the wrong side, M. de Berault. And you say that you are a scoundrel on the right. The advantage, however, is with me, and I shall back my opinion by arresting you."

A ripple of coarse laughter ran round the

hollow.. The sergeant who held the lanthorn grinned, and a trooper at a distance called out of the darkness, "*A bon chat bon rat!*" This brought a fresh burst of laughter, while I stood speechless, confounded by the stubbornness, the crassness, the insolence, of the man. "You fool!" I cried at last, "you fool!" And then M. de Cocheforêt, who had come out of the hut, and taken his stand at my elbow, interrupted me.

"Pardon me one moment," he said airily, looking at the lieutenant, with raised eyebrows, and pointing to me with his thumb. "But I am puzzled between you. This gentleman's name? Is it de Berault or de Barthe?"

"I am M. de Berault," I said brusquely, answering for myself.

"Of Paris?"

"Yes, Monsieur, of Paris."

"You are not then the gentleman who has been honouring my poor house with his presence?"

"Oh, yes!" the lieutenant struck in, grinning. "He is that gentleman, too!"

"But I thought — I understood that that was M. de Barthe."

"I am M. de Barthe, also," I retorted impatiently. "What of that, Monsieur? It was my mother's name. I took it when I came down here."

"To — er, to arrest me, may I ask?"

"Yes," I answered doggedly. "To arrest you. What of that?"

"Nothing," he replied slowly and with a steady look at me, a look I could not meet. "Except that, had I known this before, M. de Berault, I should have thought long before I surrendered to you."

The lieutenant laughed, and I felt my cheek burn. But I affected to see nothing, and turned to him again. "Now, Monsieur," I said sternly, "are you satisfied?"

"No!" he answered point blank. "I am not. You two gentlemen may have rehearsed this pretty scene a dozen times. The only word it seems to me, is, Quick March, back to Quarters."

I found myself driven to play my last card — much against my will. "Not so," I said; "I have my commission."

"Produce it!" he replied brusquely.

"Do you think that I carry it with me?" I said, in scorn. "Do you think that when I came here, alone, and not with fifty dragoons at my back, I carried the Cardinal's seal in my pocket for the first lackey to find? But you shall have it. Where is that knave of mine?"

The words were scarcely out of my mouth before his ready hand thrust a paper into my fingers. I opened it slowly, glanced at it, and amid a pause of surprise gave it to the lieutenant. He looked for a moment confounded. He stared at it, with his jaw fallen. Then with a last instinct of suspicion he bade the sergeant hold up the lanthorn, and by its light proceeded to spell out the document.

"Umph!" he ejaculated, after a moment's silence; and he cast an ugly look at me. "I see." And he read it aloud.

"By these presents I command and empower Gilles de Berault, sieur de Berault, to seek for, hold, arrest, and deliver to the Governor of the Bastile the body of Henri de Cocheforêt, and to do all such acts and things as shall be necessary to effect such arrest and delivery, for which these shall be his warrant.

"(Signed) RICHELIEU, Lieut.-Gen."

When he had done, — and he read the signature with a peculiar intonation, — some one said softly, "*Vive le roi!*" and there was a moment's silence. The sergeant lowered his lanthorn. "Is it enough?" I said hoarsely, glaring from face to face.

The lieutenant bowed stiffly. "For me?" he said. "Quite, Monsieur. I beg your pardon again. I find that my first impressions were the correct ones. Sergeant, give the gentleman his paper." And turning his shoulder rudely, he tossed the commission towards the sergeant, who picked it up, and gave it to me, grinning.

I knew that the clown would not fight, and he had his men round him; and I had no choice but to swallow the insult. As I put the paper in my breast, with as much indifference as I could assume, he gave a sharp order. The troopers began to form on the edge above, the men who had descended, to climb the bank. As the group behind him began to open and melt away, I caught sight of a white robe in the middle of it. The next moment, appearing with a suddenness which was like a blow on the cheek

to me, Mademoiselle de Cocheforêt glided forward, and came towards me. She had a hood on her head, drawn low; and for a moment I could not see her face. I forgot her brother's presence at my elbow; from habit and impulse rather than calculation, I took a step forward to meet her — though my tongue cleaved to the roof of my mouth, and I was dumb and trembling.

But she recoiled with such a look of white hate, of staring, frozen-eyed loathing, that I stepped back as if she had indeed struck me. It did not need the words which accompanied the look, the "*Do not touch me!*" which she hissed at me as she drew her skirts together, to drive me to the farther edge of the hollow; there to stand with clenched teeth and nails driven into the flesh while she hung, sobbing tearless sobs, on her brother's neck.

CHAPTER XI.

THE ROAD TO PARIS.

I REMEMBER hearing Marshal Bassompierre, who, of all men within my knowledge, had the widest experience, say that not dangers, but discomforts, prove a man, and show what he is; and that the worst sores in life are caused by crumpled rose-leaves and not by thorns.

I am inclined to agree with this. For I remember that when I came from my room on the morning after the arrest, and found hall and parlour and passage empty, and all the common rooms of the house deserted, and no meal laid, and when I divined anew from this discovery the feeling of the house towards me, — however natural and to be expected, — I felt as sharp a pang as when, the night before, I had had to face discovery and open rage and scorn. I stood in the silent, empty parlour, and looked round

me with a sense of desolation; of something lost and gone, which I could not replace. The morning was grey and cloudy, the air sharp; a shower was falling. The rose-bushes at the window swayed in the wind, and where I could remember the hot sunshine lying on floor and table, the rain beat in and stained the boards. The main door flapped and creaked to and fro. I thought of other days and meals I had taken there, and of the scent of flowers, and I fled to the hall in despair.

But here, too, was no sign of life or company, no comfort, no attendance. The ashes of the logs, by whose blaze Mademoiselle had told me the secret, lay on the hearth white and cold; and now and then a drop of moisture, sliding down the great chimney, pattered among them. The great door stood open as if the house had no longer anything to guard. The only living thing to be seen was a hound which roamed about restlessly, now gazing at the empty hearth, now lying down with pricked ears and watchful eyes. Some leaves which had been blown in rustled in a corner.

I went out moodily into the garden, and wandered down one path, and up another, looking at the dripping woods and remembering things, until I came to the stone seat. On it, against the wall, trickling with rain-drops, and with a dead leaf half filling its narrow neck, stood the pitcher of food. I thought how much had happened since Mademoiselle took her hand off it and the sergeant's lanthorn disclosed it to me. And sighing grimly, I went in again through the parlour door.

A woman was on her knees, kindling the belated fire. I stood a moment, looking at her doubtfully, wondering how she would bear herself, and what she would say to me: and then she turned, and I cried out her name in horror; for it was Madame!

She was very plainly dressed; her childish face was wan, and piteous with weeping. But either the night had worn out her passion and drained her tears, or this great exigency gave her temporary calmness; for she was perfectly composed. She shivered as her eyes met mine, and she blinked as if a light had been suddenly

thrust before her. But she turned again to her task, without speaking.

"Madame! Madame!" I cried, in a frenzy of distress. "What is this?"

"The servants would not do it," she answered, in a low but steady voice. "You are still our guest, Monsieur, and it must be done."

"But — I cannot suffer it!" I cried, in misery. "Madame de Cocheforêt, I will — I would rather do it myself!"

She raised her hand, with a strange, patient expression on her face. "Hush, please," she said. "Hush! you trouble me."

The fire took light and blazed up as she spoke, and she rose slowly from it, and, with a lingering look at it, went out; leaving me to stand and stare and listen in the middle of the floor. Presently I heard her coming back along the passage, and she entered, bearing a tray with wine and meat and bread. She set it down on the table, and with the same wan face, trembling always on the verge of tears, she began to lay out the things. The glasses clinked pitifully against the plates as she handled them; the

knives jarred with one another; and I stood by, trembling myself, and endured this strange, this awful penance.

She signed to me at last to sit down and eat; and she went herself, and stood in the garden doorway, with her back to me. I obeyed. I sat down; but though I had eaten nothing since the afternoon of the day before, and a little earlier had had appetite enough, I could not swallow. I fumbled with my knife, and munched and drank; and grew hot and angry at this farce; and then looked through the window at the dripping bushes, and the rain, and the distant sun-dial, and grew cold again.

Suddenly she turned round and came to my side. "You do not eat," she said.

I threw down my knife, and sprang up in a frenzy of passion. "*Mon Dieu!* Madame!" I cried. "Do you think I have *no* heart?"

And then in a moment I knew what I had done. In a moment she was on her knees on the floor, clasping my knees, pressing her wet cheeks to my rough clothes, crying to me for mercy — for life! life! life! his life! Oh, it

was horrible! It was horrible to see her fair hair falling over my mud-stained boots, to see her slender little form convulsed with sobs, to feel that this was a woman, a gentlewoman, who thus abased herself at my feet.

"Oh, Madame! Madame!" I cried, in my agony. "I beg you to rise. Rise, or I must go! You will drive me out!"

"Grant me his life!" she moaned passionately. "Only his life! What had he done to you, that you should hunt him down? What had we done to you, that you should slay us? Ah, Sir, have mercy! Let him go, and we will pray for you; I and my sister will pray for you every morning and night of our lives."

I was in terror lest some one should come and see her lying there, and I stooped and tried to raise her. But she would not rise; she only sank the lower until her tender hands clasped my spurs, and I dared not move. Then I took a sudden resolution. "Listen then, Madame," I said, almost sternly, "if you will not rise. When you ask what you do, you forget how I stand, and how small my power is! You forget that were I to release your

husband to-day, he would be seized within the hour by those who are still in the village, and who are watching every road — who have not ceased to suspect my movements and my intentions. You forget, I say, my circumstances — "

She cut me short on that word. She sprang abruptly to her feet and faced me. One moment, and I should have said something to the purpose. But at that word she was before me, white, breathless, dishevelled, struggling for speech. "Oh yes, yes," she panted eagerly, "I know! I understand!" And she thrust her hand into her bosom and plucked something out and gave it to me — forced it upon me into my hands. "I know! I know!" she said again. "Take it, and God reward you, Monsieur! We give it freely — freely and thankfully! And may God bless you!"

I stood and looked at her, and looked at it, and slowly froze. She had given me the packet — the packet I had restored to Mademoiselle, the parcel of jewels. I weighed it in my hands, and my heart grew hard again, for I knew that this was Mademoiselle's doing; that it was she who, mistrusting the effect of Madame's tears and prayers,

had armed her with this last weapon — this dirty bribe. I flung it down on the table among the plates, all my pity changed to anger. "Madame," I cried ruthlessly, "you mistake me altogether. I have heard hard words enough in the last twenty-four hours, and I know what you think of me! But you have yet to learn that I have never turned traitor to the hand that employed me, nor sold my own side! When I do so for a treasure ten times the worth of that, may my hand rot off!"

She sank into a seat, with a moan of despair, and at that moment the door opened, and M. de Cocheforêt came in. Over his shoulder I had a glimpse of Mademoiselle's proud face, a little whiter to-day, with dark marks under the eyes, but still firm and cold. "What is this?" he said, frowning and stopping short as his eyes lighted on Madame.

"It is — that we start at eleven o'clock, Monsieur," I answered, bowing curtly. "Those, I fancy, are your property." And pointing to the jewels, I went out by the other door.

* * * * * * * *

That I might not be present at their parting, I remained in the garden until the hour I had appointed was well passed; then without entering the house I went to the stable entrance. Here I found all ready, the two troopers (whose company I had requisitioned as far as Auch) already in the saddle, my own two knaves waiting with my sorrel and M. de Cocheforêt's chestnut. Another horse was being led up and down by Louis, and, alas, my heart winced at the sight. For it bore a lady's saddle, and I saw that we were to have company. Was it Madame who meant to come with us? or Mademoiselle? And how far? To Auch? or farther?

I suppose that they had set some kind of a watch on me; for, as I walked up, M. de Cocheforêt and his sister came out of the house, — he looking white, with bright eyes and a twitching in his cheek, though through all he affected a jaunty bearing; she wearing a black mask.

"Mademoiselle accompanies us?" I said formally.

"With your permission, Monsieur," he answered, with grim politeness. But I saw that

he was choking with emotion. I guessed that he had just parted from his wife, and I turned away.

When we were all mounted, he looked at me. "Perhaps, as you have my parole, you will permit me to ride alone," he said, with a little hesitation, "and —"

"Without me!" I rejoined keenly. "Assuredly, so far as is possible." I directed the troopers to ride in front and keep out of ear-shot; my two men followed the prisoner at a like distance, with their carbines on their knees. Last of all I rode myself, with my eyes open and a pistol loose in my holster. M. de Cocheforêt, I saw, was inclined to sneer at so many precautions, and the mountain made of his request; but I had not done so much and come so far, I had not faced scorn and insults, to be cheated of my prize at last. Aware that until we were beyond Auch there must be hourly and pressing danger of a rescue, I was determined that he who would wrest my prisoner from me should pay dearly for it. Only pride, and, perhaps, in a degree also, appetite for a fight, had prevented me borrowing ten troopers instead of two.

We started, and I looked with a lingering eye and many memories at the little bridge, the narrow woodland path, the first roofs of the village; all now familiar, all seen for the last time. Up the brook a party of soldiers were dragging for the captain's body. A furlong farther on, a cottage, burned by some carelessness in the night, lay a heap of black ashes. Louis ran beside us, weeping; the last brown leaves fluttered down in showers. And between my eyes and all, the slow, steady rain fell and fell and fell. And so I left Cocheforêt.

Louis went with us to a point a mile beyond the village, and there stood and saw us go, cursing me furiously as I passed. Looking back when we had ridden on, I still saw him standing; and after a moment's hesitation I rode back to him. "Listen, fool," I said, cutting him short in the midst of his mowing and snarling, "and give this message to your mistress. Tell her from me that it will be with her husband as it was with M. de Regnier, when he fell into the hands of his enemy — no better and no worse."

"You want to kill her, too, I suppose?" he answered, glowering at me.

"No, fool! I want to save her!" I retorted wrathfully. "Tell her that, just that and no more, and you will see the result."

"I shall not," he said sullenly. "I shall not tell her. A message from you, indeed!" And he spat on the ground.

"Then on your head be it!" I answered solemnly. And I turned my horse's head and galloped fast after the others. For, in spite of his refusal, I felt sure that he would report what I had said — if it were only out of curiosity; and it would be strange if Madame did not understand the reference.

And so we began our journey; sadly, under dripping trees and a leaden sky. The country we had to traverse was the same I had trodden on the last day of my march southwards, but the passage of a month had changed the face of everything. Green dells, where springs welling out of the chalk had made of the leafy bottom a fairies' home, strewn with delicate ferns and hung with mosses — these were now swamps into

which our horses sank to the fetlock. Sunny brows, whence I had viewed the champaign and traced my forward path, had become bare, wind-swept ridges. The beech woods, which had glowed with ruddy light, were naked now; mere black trunks and rigid arms pointing to heaven. An earthy smell filled the air; a hundred paces away a wall of mist closed the view. We plodded on sadly, up hill and down hill; now fording brooks already stained with flood-water, now crossing barren heaths.

But up hill or down hill, whatever the outlook, I was never permitted to forget that I was the jailer, the ogre, the villain; that I, riding behind in my loneliness, was the blight on all, the death-spot. True, I was behind the others; I escaped their eyes. But there was not a line of Mademoiselle's drooping figure that did not speak scorn to me, not a turn of her head that did not seem to say, "Oh God, that such a thing should breathe!"

I had only speech with her once during the day, and that was on the last ridge before we went down into the valley to climb up again to Auch. The rain had ceased; the sun, near its

setting, shone faintly; and for a few moments we stood on the brow and looked southwards while we breathed the horses. The mist lay like a pall on all the country we had traversed; but beyond it and above it, gleaming pearl-like in the level rays, the line of the mountains stood up like a land of enchantment, soft, radiant, wonderful, or like one of those castles on the Hill of Glass of which the old romances tell us. I forgot, for an instant, how we were placed, and I cried to my neighbour that it was the fairest pageant I had ever seen.

She — it was Mademoiselle, and she had taken off her mask — cast one look at me; only one, but it conveyed disgust and loathing so unspeakable that scorn beside them would have been a gift. I reined in my horse as if she had struck me, and felt myself go first hot and then cold under her eyes. Then she looked another way.

I did not forget the lesson; after that I avoided her more sedulously than before. We lay that night at Auch, and I gave M. de Cocheforêt the utmost liberty; even permitting him to go out and return at his will. In the morning, believing

that on the farther side of Auch we ran less risk of attack, I dismissed the two dragoons, and an hour after sunrise we set out again. The day was dry and cold, the weather more promising. I planned to go by way of Lectoure, crossing the Garonne at Agen; and I thought with roads continually improving as we moved northwards, we should be able to make good progress before night. My two men rode first; I came last by myself.

Our way lay for some hours down the valley of the Gers, under poplars and by long rows of willows; and presently the sun came out and warmed us. Unfortunately, the rain of the day before had swollen the brooks which crossed our path, and we more than once had a difficulty in fording them. Noon, therefore, found us little more than half-way to Lectoure, and I was growing each minute more impatient, when our road, which had for a little while left the river bank, dropped down to it again, and I saw before us another crossing, half ford, half slough. My men tried it gingerly, and gave back, and tried it again in another place· and finally, just as

Mademoiselle and Monsieur came up to them, floundered through and sprang slantwise up the farther bank.

The delay had been long enough to bring me, with no good will of my own, close up to the Cocheforêts. Mademoiselle's horse made a little business of the place; this delayed them still longer, and in the result, we entered the water almost together, and I crossed close on her heels. The bank on either side was steep; while crossing we could see neither before nor behind. At the moment, however, I thought nothing of this, nor of her delay, and I was following her quite at my leisure, when the sudden report of a carbine, a second report, and a yell of alarm in front, thrilled me through.

On the instant, while the sound was still in my ears, I saw it all. Like a hot iron piercing my brain, the truth flashed into my mind. We were attacked! We were attacked, and I was here helpless in this pit, this trap! The loss of a second while I fumbled here, Mademoiselle's horse barring the way, might be fatal.

There was but one way. I turned my horse

straight at the steep bank, and he breasted it. One moment he hung as if he must fall back. Then, with a snort of terror and a desperate bound, he topped it, and gained the level, trembling and snorting.

It was as I had guessed. Seventy paces away on the road lay one of my men. He had fallen, horse and man, and lay still. Near him, with his back against a bank, stood his fellow, on foot, pressed by four horsemen, and shouting. As my eye lighted on the scene, he let fly with a carbine and dropped one.

I snatched a pistol from my holster, cocked it, and seized my horse by the head — I might save the man yet. I shouted to encourage him, and in another second should have charged into the fight, when a sudden vicious blow, swift and unexpected, struck the pistol from my hand.

I made a snatch at it as it fell, but missed it; and before I could recover myself, Mademoiselle thrust her horse furiously against mine, and with her riding-whip, lashed the sorrel across the ears. As my horse reared madly up, I had a glimpse of her eyes flashing hate through her mask; of

her hand again uplifted; the next moment, I was down in the road, ingloriously unhorsed, the sorrel was galloping away, and her horse, scared in its turn, was plunging unmanageably a score of paces from me.

I don't doubt that but for that she would have trampled on me. As it was, I was free to draw; and in a twinkling I was running towards the fighters. All I have described had happened in a few seconds. My man was still defending himself; the smoke of the carbine had scarcely risen. I sprang with a shout across a fallen tree that intervened; at the same moment, two of the men detached themselves, and rode to meet me. One, whom I took to be the leader, was masked. He came furiously at me, trying to ride me down; but I leaped aside nimbly, and evading him, rushed at the other, and scaring his horse, so that he dropped his point, cut him across the shoulder before he could guard himself. He plunged away, cursing, and trying to hold in his horse, and I turned to meet the masked man.

"You double-dyed villain!" he cried, riding at me again. And this time he manœuvred his

horse so skilfully that I was hard put to it to prevent him knocking me down; and could not with all my efforts reach him to hurt him. "Surrender, will you!" he continued, "you bloodhound!"

I wounded him slightly in the knee for answer; but before I could do more his companion came back, and the two set upon me with a will, slashing at my head so furiously and towering above me with so great an advantage that it was all I could do to guard myself. I was soon glad to fall back against the bank — as my man had done before me. In such a conflict my rapier would have been of little use, but fortunately I had armed myself before I left Paris with a cut-and-thrust sword for the road; and though my mastery of the weapon was not on a par with my rapier-play, I was able to fend off their cuts, and by an occasional prick keep the horses at a distance. Still they swore and cut at me, trying to wear me out; and it was trying work. A little delay, the least accident, might enable the other man to come to their help, or Mademoiselle, for all I knew, might shoot me with my own pistol;

and I confess, I was unfeignedly glad when a lucky parade sent the masked man's sword flying across the road. He was no coward; for unarmed as he was, he pushed his horse at me, spurring it recklessly; but the animal, which I had several times touched, reared up instead and threw him at the very moment that I wounded his companion a second time in the arm, and made him give back.

This quite changed the scene. The man in the mask staggered to his feet, and felt stupidly for a pistol. But he could not find one, and was, I saw, in no state to use it if he had. He reeled helplessly to the bank, and leaned against it. He would give no further trouble. The man I had wounded was in scarcely better condition. He retreated before me for some paces, but then losing courage, he dropped his sword, and, wheeling round, cantered off down the road, clinging to his pommel. There remained only the fellow engaged with my man, and I turned to see how they were getting on. They were standing to take breath, so I ran towards them; but, seeing me coming, this rascal, too, whipped round his

horse, and disappeared in the wood, and left us masters of the field. The first thing I did — and I remember it to this day with pleasure — was to plunge my hand into my pocket, take out half the money I had in the world, and press it on the man who had fought for me so stoutly, and who had certainly saved me from disaster. In my joy I could have kissed him! It was not only that I had escaped defeat by the skin of my teeth, — and his good sword, — but I knew, and thrilled with the knowledge, that the fight had altered the whole position. He was wounded in two places, and I had a scratch or two, and had lost my horse; and my other poor fellow was dead as a herring. But speaking for myself, I would have spent half the blood in my body to purchase the feeling with which I turned back to speak to M. de Cocheforêt and his sister. *I had fought before them.*

Mademoiselle had dismounted, and with her face averted and her mask pushed on one side, was openly weeping. Her brother, who had scrupulously kept his place by the ford from the beginning of the fight to the end, met me with raised eyebrows and a peculiar smile. "Acknowledge

my virtue," he said airily. "I am here, M. de Berault — which is more than can be said of the two gentlemen who have just ridden off."

"Yes," I answered, with a touch of bitterness. "I wish they had not shot my poor man before they went."

He shrugged his shoulders. "They were my friends," he said. "You must not expect me to blame them. But that is not all."

"No," I said, wiping my sword. "There is this gentleman in the mask." And I turned to go towards him.

"M. de Berault!" There was something abrupt in the way in which Cocheforêt called my name after me.

I stood. "Pardon?" I said, turning.

"That gentleman?" he answered, hesitating, and looking at me doubtfully. "Have you considered — what will happen to him, if you give him up to the authorities?"

"Who is he?" I said sharply.

"That is rather a delicate question," he answered, frowning, and still looking at me fixedly.

"Not from me," I replied brutally, "since he is in my power. If he will take off his mask, I shall know better what I intend to do with him."

The stranger had lost his hat in his fall, and his fair hair, stained with dust, hung in curls on his shoulders. He was a tall man, of a slender, handsome presence, and though his dress was plain and almost rough, I espied a splendid jewel on his hand, and fancied I detected other signs of high quality. He still lay against the bank in a half-swooning condition, and seemed unconscious of my scrutiny. "Should I know him if he unmasked?" I said suddenly, a new idea in my head.

"You would," M. de Cocheforêt answered simply.

"And?"

"It would be bad for every one."

"Ho, ho!" I said softly, looking hard, first at my old prisoner, and then at my new one. "Then, what do you wish me to do?"

"Leave him here," M. de Cocheforêt answered glibly, his face flushed, the pulse in his cheek

beating. I had known him for a man of perfect honour before, and trusted him. But this evident earnest anxiety on behalf of his friend touched me. Besides, I knew that I was treading on slippery ground; that it behoved me to be careful. "I will do it," I said, after a moment's reflection. "He will play me no tricks, I suppose? A letter of —"

"*Mon Dieu*, no! He will understand," Cocheforêt answered eagerly. "You will not repent it, I swear. Let us be going."

"Well, — but my horse?" I said, somewhat taken aback by this extreme haste.

"We shall overtake it," he replied urgently. "It will have kept to the road. Lectoure is no more than a league from here, and we can give orders there to have these two fetched in and buried."

I had nothing to gain by demurring, and so it was arranged. After that we did not linger. We picked up what we had dropped, M. de Cocheforêt mounted his sister, and within five minutes we were gone. Casting a glance back from the skirts of the wood, as we entered it, I fancied

that I saw the masked man straighten himself and turn to look after us; but the leaves were beginning to intervene, the distance was great and perhaps cheated me. And yet I was not disinclined to think the unknown a little less severely injured and a trifle more observant than he seemed.

CHAPTER XII.

AT THE FINGER-POST.

THROUGH all, it will have been noticed, Mademoiselle had not spoken to me, nor said one word, good or bad. She had played her part grimly; had taken her defeat in silence, if with tears; had tried neither prayer, nor defence, nor apology. And the fact that the fight was now over, the scene left behind, made no difference in her conduct—to my surprise and discomfiture. She kept her face averted from me; she rode as before; she affected to ignore my presence. I caught my horse feeding by the road-side, a furlong forward, and mounted, and fell into place behind the two, as in the morning. And just as we had plodded on then in silence, we plodded on now, while I wondered at the unfathomable ways of women, and knowing that I had borne myself well, marvelled that she could take part in such an incident and remain unchanged.

Yet it had made a change in her. Though her mask screened her well, it could not entirely hide her emotions, and by-and-bye I marked that her head drooped, that she rode sadly and listlessly, that the lines of her figure were altered. I noticed that she had flung away, or furtively dropped, her riding-whip, and I understood that to the old hatred of me were now added shame and vexation; shame that she had so lowered herself, even to save her brother, vexation that defeat had been her only reward.

Of this I saw a sign at Lectoure, where the inn had but one common room, and we must all dine in company. I secured for them a table by the fire, and leaving them standing by it, retired myself to a smaller one, near the door. There were no other guests, and this made the separation between us more marked. M. de Cocheforêt seemed to feel this. He shrugged his shoulders and looked at me with a smile half sad, half comical. But Mademoiselle was implacable. She had taken off her mask, and her face was like stone. Once, only once, during the meal I saw a change come over her. She coloured, I suppose

at her thoughts, until her face flamed from brow to chin. I watched the blush spread and spread, and then she slowly and proudly turned her shoulder to me, and looked through the window at the shabby street.

I suppose that she and her brother had both built on this attempt, which must have been arranged at Auch. For when we went on in the afternoon, I saw a more marked change. They rode now like people resigned to the worst. The grey realities of the brother's position, the dreary, hopeless future, began to hang like a mist before their eyes; began to tinge the landscape with sadness; robbed even the sunset of its colours. With each hour their spirits flagged and their speech became less frequent, until presently, when the light was nearly gone and the dusk was round us, the brother and sister rode hand in hand, silent, gloomy, one at least of them weeping. The cold shadow of the Cardinal, of Paris, of the scaffold, was beginning to make itself felt; was beginning to chill them. As the mountains which they had known all their lives sank and faded behind us, and we entered on the wide, low valley of the Garonne.

their hopes sank and faded also — sank to the dead-level of despair. Surrounded by guards, a mark for curious glances, with pride for a companion, M. de Cocheforêt could doubtless have borne himself bravely; doubtless he would bear himself bravely still when the end came. But almost alone, moving forward through the grey evening to a prison, with so many measured days before him, and nothing to exhilarate or anger, — in this condition it was little wonder if he felt, and betrayed that he felt, the blood run slow in his veins; if he thought more of the weeping wife and ruined home, which he left behind him, than of the cause in which he had spent himself.

But God knows, they had no monopoly of gloom. I felt almost as sad myself. Long before sunset the flush of triumph, the heat of the battle, which had warmed my heart at noon, were gone; giving place to a chill dissatisfaction, a nausea, a despondency, such as I have known follow a long night at the tables. Hitherto there had been difficulties to be overcome, risks to be run, doubts about the end. Now the end was certain, and very near; so near that it filled all the prospect.

One hour of triumph I might still have; I hugged the thought of it as a gambler hugs his last stake. I planned the place and time and mode, and tried to occupy myself wholly with it. But the price? Alas, that would intrude too, and more as the evening waned; so that as I passed this or that thing by the road, which I could recall passing on my journey south, — with thoughts so different, with plans that now seemed so very, very old, — I asked myself grimly if this were really I, if this were Gil de Berault, known as Zaton's *premier joueur;* or some Don Quichotte from Castile, tilting at windmills, and taking barbers' bowls for gold.

We reached Agen very late in the evening, after groping through a by-way near the river, set with holes and willow-stools and frog-spawns — a place no better than a slough. After it the great fire and the lights at the Blue Maid seemed like a glimpse of a new world, and in a twinkling put something of life and spirits into two at least of us. There was queer talk round the hearth here of doings in Paris, — of a stir against the Cardinal, with the Queen-mother at

bottom, and of grounded expectations that something might this time come of it. But the landlord pooh-poohed the idea, and I more than agreed with him. Even M. de Cocheforêt, who was for a moment inclined to build on it, gave up hope when he heard that it came only by way of Montauban; whence, since its reduction the year before, all sorts of *canards* against the Cardinal were always on the wing.

"They kill him about once a month," our host said, with a grin. "Sometimes it is *Monsieur* who is to prove a match for him, sometimes *César Monsieur* — the Duke of Vendôme, you understand, — and sometimes the Queen-mother. But since M. de Chalais and the Marshal made a mess of it, and paid forfeit, I pin my faith to His Eminence — that is his new title, they tell me."

"Things are quiet round here?" I asked.

"Perfectly. Since the Languedoc business came to an end, all goes well," he answered.

Mademoiselle had retired on our arrival, so that her brother and I were for an hour or two thrown together. I left him at liberty to separate

himself if he pleased, but he did not use the opportunity. A kind of comradeship, rendered piquant by our peculiar relations, had begun to spring up between us. He seemed to take pleasure in my company, more than once rallied me on my post of jailer, would ask humorously if he might do this or that, and once even inquired what I should do if he broke his parole.

"Or take it this way," he continued flippantly. "Suppose I had stuck you in the back this evening, in that cursed swamp by the river, M. de Berault? What then? *Pardieu!* I am astonished at myself that I did not do it. I could have been in Montauban within twenty-four hours, and found fifty hiding-places, and no one the wiser."

"Except your sister," I said quietly.

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "Yes," he said, "I am afraid I must have put her out of the way too, to preserve my self-respect. You are right." And on that he fell into a reverie which held him for a few minutes. Then I found him looking at me with a kind of frank perplexity that invited question.

"What is it?" I said.

"You have fought a great many duels?"

"Yes," I said.

"Did you never strike a foul blow in one of them?"

"Never. Why do you ask?"

"Well, — I wanted to confirm an impression," he said. "To be frank, M. de Berault, I seem to see in you two men."

"Two men?"

"Yes, two men," he answered. "One, the man who captured me; the other, the man who let my friend go free to-day."

"It surprised you that I let him go? That was prudence, M. de Cocheforêt," I replied, "nothing more. I am an old gambler — I know when the stakes are too high for me. The man who caught a lion in his wolf-pit had no great catch."

"No, that is true," he answered, smiling. "And yet — I find two men in your skin."

"I dare say that there are two in most men's skins," I answered, with a sigh, "but not always together. Sometimes one is there, and sometimes the other."

"How does the one like taking up the other's work?" he asked keenly.

I shrugged my shoulders. "That is as may be," I said. "You do not take an estate without the debts."

He did not answer for a moment, and I fancied that his thoughts had reverted to his own case. But on a sudden he looked at me again. "Will you answer me a question, M. de Berault?" he said, with a winning smile.

"Perhaps," I said.

"Then tell me — it is a tale that is, I am sure, worth the telling. What was it that, in a very evil hour for me, sent you in search of me?"

"The Cardinal," I answered.

"I did not ask who," he replied drily. "I asked, what. You had no grudge against me?"

"No."

"No knowledge of me?"

"No."

"Then what on earth induced you to do it? Heavens, man," he continued bluntly, rising and speaking with greater freedom than he had before used, "nature never intended you for a tipstaff! What was it, then?"

I rose too. It was very late, and the room was empty, the fire low. "I will tell you — to-morrow!" I said. "I shall have something to say to you then, of which that will be part."

He looked at me in great astonishment; with a little suspicion, too. But I put him off, and called for a light, and by going at once to bed, cut short his questions.

Those who know the great south road to Agen, and how the vineyards rise in terraces north of the town, one level of red earth above another, green in summer, but in late autumn bare and stony, will remember a particular place where the road two leagues from the town runs up a long hill. At the top of the hill four ways meet; and there, plain to be seen against the sky is a finger-post, indicating which way leads to Bordeaux, and which to Montauban, and which to Perigueux.

This hill had impressed me on my journey down; perhaps, because I had from it my first view of the Garonne valley, and there felt myself on the verge of the south country where my mission lay. It had taken root in my memory;

I had come to look upon its bare, bleak brow, with the finger-post and the four roads, as the first outpost of Paris, as the first sign of return to the old life.

Now for two days I had been looking forward to seeing it again. That long stretch of road would do admirably for something I had in my mind. That sign-post, with the roads pointing north, south, east, and west, could there be a better place for meetings and partings?

We came to the bottom of the ascent about an hour before noon — M. de Cocheforêt, Mademoiselle, and I. We had reversed the order of yesterday, and I rode ahead. They came after me at their leisure. At the foot of the hill, however, I stopped and, letting Mademoiselle pass on, detained M. de Cocheforêt by a gesture. "Pardon me, one moment," I said. "I want to ask a favour."

He looked at me somewhat fretfully, with a gleam of wildness in his eyes that betrayed how the iron was eating into his heart. He had started after breakfast as gaily as a bridegroom, but gradually he had sunk below himself; and

now he had much ado to curb his impatience. The *bonhomie* of last night was quite gone. "Of me?" he said. "What is it?"

"I wish to have a few words with Mademoiselle — alone," I explained.

"Alone?" he answered, frowning.

"Yes," I replied, without blenching, though his face grew dark. "For the matter of that, you can be within call all the time, if you please. But I have a reason for wishing to ride a little way with her."

"To tell her something?"

"Yes."

"Then you can tell it to me," he retorted suspiciously. "Mademoiselle, I will answer for it, has no desire to —"

"See me, or speak to me!" I said, taking him up. "I can understand that. Yet I want to speak to her."

"Very well, you can speak to her before me," he answered rudely. "Let us ride on and join her." And he made a movement as if to do so.

"That will not do, M. de Cocheforêt," I said

firmly, stopping him with my hand. "Let me beg you to be more complaisant. It is a small thing I ask; but I swear to you, if Mademoiselle does not grant it, she will repent it all her life."

He looked at me, his face growing darker and darker. "Fine words!" he said presently, with a sneer. "Yet I fancy I understand them." Then with a passionate oath he broke out in a fresh tone. "But I will not have it. I have not been blind, M. de Berault, and I understand. But I will not have it! I will have no such Judas bargain made. *Pardieu!* do you think I could suffer it and show my face again?"

"I don't know what you mean!" I said, restraining myself with difficulty. I could have struck the fool.

"But I know what you mean," he replied, in a tone of repressed rage. "You would have her sell herself: sell herself body and soul to you to save me! And you would have me stand by and see the thing done! Well, my answer is — never! though I go to the wheel! I will die a gentleman, if I have lived a fool!"

"I think you will do the one as certainly as you have done the other," I retorted, in my exasperation. And yet I admired him.

"Oh, I am not such a fool," he cried, scowling at me, "as you have perhaps thought. I have used my eyes."

"Then be good enough now to favour me with your ears," I answered drily. "And listen when I say that no such bargain has ever crossed my mind. You were kind enough to think well of me last night, M. de Cocheforêt. Why should the mention of Mademoiselle in a moment change your opinion? I wish simply to speak to her. I have nothing to ask from her; neither favour nor anything else. And what I say she will doubtless tell you afterwards. *Ciel*, man!" I continued angrily, "what harm can I do to her, in the road, in your sight?"

He looked at me sullenly, his face still flushed, his eyes suspicious. "What do you want to say to her?" he asked jealously. He was quite unlike himself. His airy nonchalance, his careless gaiety, were gone.

"You know what I do *not* want to say to her,

M. de Cocheforêt," I answered. "That should be enough."

He glowered at me for a moment, still ill content. Then, without a word, he made me a gesture to go to her.

She had halted a score of paces away, wondering doubtless what was on foot. I rode towards her. She wore her mask, so that I lost the expression of her face as I approached, but the manner in which she turned her horse's head uncompromisingly towards her brother, and looked past me — as if I were merely a log in the road — was full of meaning. I felt the ground suddenly cut from under me. I saluted her, trembling. "Mademoiselle," I said, "will you grant me the privilege of your company for a few minutes, as we ride."

"To what purpose, Sir?" she answered, in the coldest voice in which I think a woman ever spoke to a man.

"That I may explain to you a great many things you do not understand," I murmured.

"I prefer to be in the dark," she replied. And her manner said more than her words.

"But, Mademoiselle," I pleaded, — I would not be discouraged, — "you told me one day that you would never judge me hastily again."

"Facts judge you, not I, Sir," she answered icily. "I am not sufficiently on a level with you to be able to judge you — I thank God."

I shivered though the sun was on me, and the hollow where we stood was warm. "Still — once before you thought the same!" I exclaimed. "Afterwards you found that you had been wrong. It may be so again, Mademoiselle."

"Impossible," she said.

That stung me. "No!" I said fiercely. "It is not impossible. It is you who are impossible! It is you who are heartless, Mademoiselle. I have done much, very much, in the last three days to make things lighter for you. I ask you now to do something for me which can cost you nothing."

"Nothing?" she answered slowly; and her scornful voice cut me as if it had been a knife. "Do you think, Monsieur, it costs me nothing to lose my self-respect, as I do with every word I speak to you? Do you think it costs me noth-

ing to be here, where I feel every look you cast on me an insult, every breath I take in your presence a contamination. Nothing, Monsieur?" She laughed in bitter irony. "Oh, be sure, something! But something which I despair of making clear to you."

I sat for a moment in my saddle, shaken and quivering with pain. It had been one thing to feel that she hated and scorned me, to know that the trust and confidence which she had begun to place in me were changed to loathing. It was another to listen to her hard, pitiless words, to change colour under the lash of her gibing tongue. For a moment I could not find voice to answer her. Then I pointed to M. de Cocheforêt. "Do you love him?" I said, hoarsely, roughly. The gibing tone had passed from her voice to mine.

She did not answer.

"Because, if you do," I continued, "you will let me tell my tale. Say no but once more, Mademoiselle, — I am only human, — and I go. And you will repent it all your life."

I had done better had I taken that tone from

the beginning. She winced, her head drooped, she seemed to grow smaller. All in a moment, as it were, her pride collapsed. "I will hear you," she answered feebly.

"Then we will ride on, if you please," I said, keeping the advantage I had gained. "You need not fear. Your brother will follow."

I caught hold of her rein and turned her horse, and she suffered it without demur. In a moment we were pacing side by side, the long, straight road before us. At the end where it topped the hill, I could see the finger-post, — two faint black lines against the sky. When we reached that, involuntarily I checked my horse and made it move more slowly.

"Well, Sir," she said impatiently. And her figure shook as if with cold.

"It is a tale I desire to tell you, Mademoiselle," I answered, speaking with effort. "Perhaps I may seem to begin a long way off, but before I end, I promise to interest you. Two months ago there was living in Paris a man, perhaps a bad man, at any rate, by common report, a hard man."

She turned to me suddenly, her eyes gleaming through her mask. "Oh, Monsieur, spare me this!" she said, quietly scornful. "I will take it for granted."

"Very well," I replied steadfastly. "Good or bad, this man, one day, in defiance of the Cardinal's edict against duelling, fought with a young Englishman behind St. Jacques Church. The Englishman had influence, the person of whom I speak had none, and an indifferent name; he was arrested, thrown into the Châtelet, cast for death, left for days to face death. At the last an offer was made to him. If he would seek out and deliver up another man, an outlaw with a price upon his head, he should himself go free."

I paused and drew a deep breath. Then I continued, looking not at her, but into the distance: "Mademoiselle, it seems easy now to say what course he should have chosen. It seems hard now to find excuses for him. But there was one thing which I plead for him. The task he was asked to undertake was a dangerous one. He risked, he knew he must risk, and the

event proved him right, his life against the life of this unknown man. And — one thing more — there was time before him. The outlaw might be taken by another, might be killed, might die, might —. But there, Mademoiselle, we know what answer this person made. He took the baser course, and on his honour, on his parole, with money supplied to him, went free, — free on the condition that he delivered up this other man."

I paused again, but I did not dare to look at her, and after a moment of silence I resumed. "Some portion of the second half of this story you know, Mademoiselle; but not all. Suffice it that this man came down to a remote village, and there at a risk, but Heaven knows, basely enough, found his way into his victim's home. Once there, his heart began to fail him. Had he found the house garrisoned by men, he might have pressed on to his end with little remorse. But he found there only two helpless, loyal women; and I say again that from the first hour of his entrance he sickened of the work he had in hand. Still he pursued it. He

had given his word, and if there was one tradition of his race which this man had never broken, it was that of fidelity to his side; to the man that paid him. But he pursued it with only half his mind, in great misery sometimes, if you will believe me, in agonies of shame. Gradually, however, almost against his will, the drama worked itself out before him, until he needed only one thing."

I looked at Mademoiselle. But her head was averted; I could gather nothing from the outlines of her form. And I went on. "Do not misunderstand me," I said, in a lower voice. "Do not misunderstand what I am going to say next. This is no love story, and can have no ending such as romancers love to set to their tales. But I am bound to mention, Mademoiselle, that this man, who had lived about inns and eating-houses, and at the gaming-tables almost all his days, met here for the first time for years a good woman; and learned by the light of her loyalty and devotion to see what his life had been, and what was the real nature of the work he was doing. I think, — nay, I know — that it added a

hundredfold to his misery, that when he learned at last the secret he had come to surprise, he learned it from her lips, and in such a way that had he felt no shame, hell could have been no place for him. But in one thing she misjudged him. She thought, and had reason to think, that the moment he knew her secret he went out, not even closing the door, and used it. But the truth was that, while her words were still in his ears, news came to him that others had the secret; and had he not gone out on the instant, and done what he did, and forestalled them, M. de Cocheforêt would have been taken, but by others."

Mademoiselle broke her long silence so suddenly that her horse sprang forward. "Would to Heaven he had!" she wailed.

"Been taken by others?" I exclaimed, startled out of my false composure.

"Oh, yes, yes!" she answered passionately. "Why did you not tell me? Why did you not confess to me even then? I — oh, no more! No more!" she continued, in a piteous voice. "I have heard enough. You are racking my

heart, M. de Berault. Some day I will ask God to give me strength to forgive you."

"But you have not heard me out," I replied.

"I want to hear no more," she answered, in a voice she vainly strove to render steady. "To what end? Can I say more than I have said? Did you think I could forgive you now — with him behind us going to his death? Oh, no, no!" she continued. "Leave me! I implore you to leave me. I am not well."

She drooped over her horse's neck as she spoke and began to weep so passionately that the tears ran down her cheeks under her mask, and fell and sparkled like dew on the mane before her; while her sobs shook her so painfully that I thought she must fall. I stretched out my hand instinctively to give her help; but she shrank from me. "No!" she gasped, between her sobs. "Do not touch me. There is too much between us."

"Yet there must be one thing more between us," I answered firmly. "You must listen to me a little longer, whether you will or no, Mademoiselle, for the love you bear to your brother.

There is one course still open to me by which I may redeem my honour; it has been in my mind for some time back to take that course. To-day, I am thankful to say, I can take it cheerfully, if not without regret; with a steadfast heart, if with no light one. Mademoiselle," I continued earnestly, feeling none of the triumph, none of the vanity, I had foreseen, but only joy in the joy I could give her, "I thank God that it *is* still in my power to undo what I have done; that it is still in my power to go back to him who sent me, and telling him that I have changed my mind and will bear my own burdens, to pay the penalty."

We were within a hundred paces of the brow of the hill and the finger-post now. She cried out wildly that she did not understand. "What is it you have just said?" she murmured. "I cannot hear." And she began to fumble with the ribbon of her mask.

"Only this, Mademoiselle," I answered gently. "I give back to your brother his word and his parole. From this moment he is free to go whither he pleases. You shall tell him so from

me. Here, where we stand, four roads meet. That to the right goes to Montauban, where you have doubtless friends, and can lie hid for a time; or that to the left leads to Bordeaux, where you can take ship if you please. And in a word Mademoiselle," I continued, ending a little feebly, "I hope that your troubles are now over."

She turned her face to me — we had both come to a standstill — and plucked at the fastenings of her mask. But her trembling fingers had knotted the string, and in a moment she dropped her hands with a cry of despair. "And you? You?" she said, in a voice so changed I should not have known it for hers. "What will you do? I do not understand. This mask! I cannot hear."

"There is a third road," I answered. "It leads to Paris. That is my road, Mademoiselle. We part here."

"But why? Why?" she cried wildly.

"Because from to-day I would fain begin to be honourable," I answered, in a low voice. "Because I dare not be generous at another's cost. I must go back to the Châtelet."

She tried feverishly to raise her mask with her hand. "I am — not well," she stammered. "I cannot breathe."

She swayed so violently in her saddle as she spoke, that I sprang down, and running round her horse's head, was just in time to catch her as she fell. She was not quite unconscious then, for, as I supported her, she murmured, "Leave me! Leave me! I am not worthy that you should touch me."

Those words made me happy. I carried her to the bank, my heart on fire, and laid her against it just as M. de Cocheforêt rode up. He sprang from his horse, his eyes blazing with anger. "What is this?" he cried harshly. "What have you been saying to her, man?"

"She will tell you," I answered drily, my composure returning under his eye, — "amongst other things, that you are free. From this moment, M. de Cocheforêt, I give you back your parole, and I take my own honour. Farewell."

He cried out something as I mounted, but I did not stay to hear or answer. I dashed the spurs into my horse, and rode away past the cross-

roads, past the finger-post; away with the level upland stretching before me, dry, bare, almost treeless — and behind me all I loved. Once, when I had gone a hundred yards, I looked back and saw him standing upright against the sky, staring after me across her body. And again I looked back. This time I saw only the slender wooden cross, and below it a dark blurred mass.

CHAPTER XIII.

ST. MARTIN'S EVE.

It was late evening on the last day but one of November, when I rode into Paris through the Orleans gate. The wind was in the north-east, and a great cloud of vapour hung in the eye of an angry sunset. The air seemed to be full of wood smoke, the kennels reeked, my gorge rose at the city's smell; and with all my heart I envied the man who had gone out of it by the same gate nearly two months before, with his face to the south, and the prospect of riding day after day across heath and moor and pasture. At least he had had some weeks of life before him, and freedom, and the open air, and hope and uncertainty, while I came back under doom; and in the pall of smoke that hung over the huddle of innumerable roofs, saw a gloomy shadowing of my own fate.

For make no mistake. A man in middle life does not strip himself of the worldly habit with which experience has clothed him, does not run counter to all the cynical saws and instances by which he has governed his course so long, without shiverings and doubts and horrible misgivings and struggles of heart. At least a dozen times between the Loire and Paris, I asked myself what honour was; and what good it would do me when I lay rotting and forgotten; if I was not a fool following a Jack-o'-lanthorn; and whether, of all the men in the world, the relentless man to whom I was returning, would not be the first to gibe at my folly.

However, shame kept me straight; shame and the memory of Mademoiselle's looks and words. I dared not be false to her again; I could not, after speaking so loftily, fall so low. And therefore — though not without many a secret struggle and quaking — I came, on this last evening but one of November, to the Orleans gate, and rode slowly and sadly through the streets by the Luxembourg, on my way to the Pont au Change.

The struggle had sapped my last strength,

however; and with the first whiff of the gutters, the first rush of barefooted *gamins* under my horse's hoofs, the first babel of street cries, the first breath, in a word, of Paris, there came a new temptation — to go for one last night to Zaton's to see the tables again and the faces of surprise; to be, for an hour or two, the old Berault. That could be no breach of honour; for in any case I could not reach the Cardinal before to-morrow. And it could do no harm. It could make no change in anything. It would not have been a thing worth struggling about — only I had in my inmost heart suspicions that the stoutest resolutions might lose their force in that atmosphere; that even such a talisman as the memory of a woman's looks and words might lose its virtue there.

Still I think I should have succumbed in the end, if I had not received at the corner of the Luxembourg a shock which sobered me effectually. As I passed the gates, a coach followed by two outriders swept out of the palace courtyard; it was going at a great pace, and I reined my jaded horse on one side to give it room. As

it whirled by me, one of the leather curtains flapped back, and I saw for a second, by the waning light, — the nearer wheels were no more than two feet from my boot, — a face inside.

A face, and no more, and that only for a second! But it froze me. It was Richelieu's, the Cardinal's; but not as I had been wont to see it, keen, cold, acute, with intellect and indomitable will in every feature. This face was distorted with rage and impatience; with the fever of haste and the fear of death. The eyes burned under the pale brow, the mustachios bristled, the teeth showed through the beard; I could fancy the man crying "Faster! Faster!" and gnawing his nails in the impatience of passion; and I shrank back as if I had been struck. The next moment the galloping outriders splashed me, the coach was a hundred paces ahead, and I was left chilled and wondering, foreseeing the worst, and no longer in any mood for the gaming-table.

Such a revelation of such a man was enough to appall me. Conscience cried out that he must have heard that Cocheforêt had escaped, and through me! But I dismissed the idea as soon as formed.

In the vast meshes of the Cardinal's schemes, Cocheforêt could be only a small fish; and to account for the face in the coach I needed a cataclysm, a catastrophe, a misfortune, as far above ordinary mishaps, as this man's intellect rose above the common run of minds.

It was almost dark when I crossed the bridges, and crept despondently to the Rue Savonnerie. After stabling my horse, I took my bag and holsters, and climbing the stairs to my old landlord's, — the place seemed to have grown strangely mean and small and ill-smelling in my absence, — I knocked at the door. It was opened by the little tailor himself, who threw up his arms at the sight of me. "By St. Geneviève!" he said. "If it is not M. de Berault!"

"No other," I said. It touched me a little, after my lonely journey, to find him so glad to see me — though I had never done him a greater benefit than sometimes to unbend with him and borrow his money. "You look surprised, little man!" I continued, as he made way for me to enter. "I'll be sworn you have been pawning my goods and letting my room, you knave!"

"Never, your excellency!" he answered, beaming on me. "On the contrary, I have been expecting you."

"How?" I said. "To-day?"

"To-day or to-morrow," he answered, following me in and closing the door. "The first thing I said, when I heard the news this morning, was, Now we shall have M. de Berault back again. Your excellency will pardon the children," he continued, as I took the old seat on the three-legged stool before the hearth. "The night is cold, and there is no fire in your room."

While he ran to and fro with my cloak and bags, little Gil, to whom I had stood at St. Sulpice's — borrowing ten crowns the same day, I remember — came shyly to play with my sword-hilt. "So you expected me back when you heard the news, Frison, did you?" I said, taking the lad on my knee.

"To be sure, your excellency," he answered, peeping into the black pot before he lifted it to the hook.

"Very good. Then, now, let us hear what the news was," I said drily.

"Of the Cardinal, M. de Berault."

"Ah? And what?"

He looked at me, holding the heavy pot suspended in his hands. "You have not heard?" he exclaimed, his jaw falling.

"Not a tittle. Tell it me, my good fellow."

"You have not heard that His Eminence is disgraced?"

I stared at him. "Not a word," I said.

He set down the pot. "Your excellency must have made a very long journey indeed, then," he said, with conviction. "For it has been in the air a week or more, and I thought it had brought you back. A week? A month, I dare say. They whisper that it is the old Queen's doing. At any rate, it is certain that they have cancelled his commissions and displaced his officers. There are rumours of immediate peace with Spain. His enemies are lifting up their heads, and I hear that he has relays of horses set all the way to the coast, that he may fly at any moment. For what I know he may be gone already."

"But, man," I said — "the King! You forget the King. Let the Cardinal once pipe to him, and

he will dance. And they will dance, too!" I added grimly.

"Yes," Frison answered eagerly. "True, your excellency, but the King will not see him. Three times to-day, as I am told, the Cardinal has driven to the Luxembourg, and stood like any common man in the ante-chamber, so that I hear it was pitiful to see him. But His Majesty would not admit him. And when he went away the last time, I am told that his face was like death! Well, he was a great man, and we may be worse ruled, M. de Berault, saving your presence. If the nobles did not like him, he was good to the traders, and the *bourgeoisie*, and equal to all."

"Silence, man! Silence, and let me think," I said, much excited. And while he bustled to and fro, getting my supper, and the firelight played about the snug, sorry little room, and the child toyed with his plaything, I fell to digesting this great news, and pondering how I stood now and what I ought to do. At first sight, I know, it seemed that I had nothing to do but sit still. In a few hours the man who held my bond would be powerless, and I should be free. In a few hours

I might smile at him. To all appearance, the dice had fallen well for me. I had done a great thing, run a great risk, won a woman's love, and after all was not to pay the penalty!

But a word which fell from Frison as he fluttered round me, pouring out the broth, and cutting the bread, dropped into my mind and spoiled my satisfaction. "Yes, your excellency," he exclaimed, confirming something he had said before, and which I had missed, "and I am told that the last time he came into the gallery, there was not a man of all the scores who attended his *levée* last Monday would speak to him. They fell off like rats,—just like rats,—until he was left standing all alone. And I have seen him!" Frison lifted up his eyes and his hands and drew in his breath. "Ah, I have seen the King look shabby beside him! And his eye! I would not like to meet it now."

"Pish!" I growled. "Some one has fooled you. Men are wiser than that."

"So? Well, your excellency understands. But —there are no cats on a cold hearth."

I told him again that he was a fool. But withal

I felt uncomfortable. This was a great man if ever a great man lived, and they were all leaving him; and I — well, I had no cause to love him. But I had taken his money, I had accepted his commission, and I had betrayed him. Those three things being so, if he fell before I could — with the best will in the world — set myself right with him, so much the better for me. That was my gain, the fortune of war. But if I lay hid, and took time for my ally, and being here while he stood still, — though tottering, — waited until he fell, what of my honour then? What of the grand words I had said to Mademoiselle at Agen? I should be like the recreant in the old romance, who, lying in the ditch while the battle raged, came out afterwards and boasted of his courage.

And yet the flesh was weak. A day, twenty-four hours, two days, might make the difference between life and death. At last I settled what I would do. At noon the next day, the time at which I should have presented myself, if I had not heard this news, at that time I would still present myself. Not earlier; I owed myself the chance. Not later; that was due to him.

Having so settled it, I thought to rest in peace. But with the first light I was awake; and it was all I could do to keep myself quiet until I heard Frison stirring. I called to him then to know if there was any news, and lay waiting and listening while he went down to the street to learn. It seemed an endless time before he came back; an age, after he came back, before he spoke.

"Well, he has not set off?" I cried at last, unable to control my eagerness.

Of course he had not. At nine o'clock I sent Frison out again; and at ten, and at eleven — always with the same result. I was like a man waiting, and looking, and, above all, listening for a reprieve, and as sick as any craven. But when he came back at eleven, I gave up hope, and dressed myself carefully. I suppose I still had an odd look, however; for Frison stopped me at the door and asked me, with evident alarm, whither I was going.

I put the little man aside gently. "To the tables," I said. "To make a big throw, my friend."

It was a fine morning; sunny, keen, pleasant. Even the streets smelled fresh. But I scarcely noticed it. All my thoughts were where I was going. It seemed but a step from my threshold to the Hotel Richelieu. I was no sooner gone from the one than I found myself at the other. As on the memorable evening, when I had crossed the street in a drizzling rain, and looked that way with foreboding, there were two or three guards in the Cardinal's livery, loitering before the gates. But this was not all. Coming nearer, I found the opposite pavement under the Louvre thronged with people; not moving about their business, but standing all silent, all looking across furtively, all with the air of persons who wished to be thought passing by. Their silence and their keen looks had in some way an air of menace. Looking back after I had turned in towards the gates, I found them devouring me with their eyes.

Certainly they had little else to look at. In the courtyard, where some mornings when the court was in Paris I had seen a score of coaches waiting and thrice as many servants, were now

emptiness and sunshine and stillness. The officer, who stood twisting his mustachios, on guard, looked at me in wonder as I passed. The lackeys lounging in the portico, and all too much taken up with whispering to make a pretence of being of service, grinned at my appearance. But that which happened when I had mounted the stairs, and come to the door of the antechamber, outdid all. The man on guard there would have opened the door; but when I went to take advantage of the offer, and enter, a majordomo, who was standing near, muttering with two or three of his kind, hastened forward and stopped me.

"Your business, Monsieur, if you please?" he said inquisitively. And I wondered why the others looked at me so strangely.

"I am M. de Berault," I answered sharply. "I have the *entrée*."

He bowed politely enough. "Yes, M. de Berault, I have the honour to know your face," he said. "But pardon me. Have you business with His Eminence?"

"I have the common business," I answered

bluntly, "by which many of us live, sirrah! — to wait on him."

"But — by appointment, Monsieur?" he persisted.

"No," I said, astonished. "It is the usual hour. For the matter of that, however, I have business with him."

The man looked at me for a moment, in apparent embarrassment. Then he stood reluctantly aside, and signed to the door-keeper to open the door. I passed in, uncovering, with an assured face, ready to meet all eyes. Then in a moment, on the threshold, the mystery was explained.

The room was empty.

CHAPTER XIV.

ST. MARTIN'S SUMMER.

YES, at the great Cardinal's *levée* I was the only client. I stared round the room, a long narrow gallery, through which it was his custom to walk every morning, after receiving his more important visitors. I stared, I say, round this room, in a state of stupefaction. The seats against either wall were empty, the recesses of the windows empty too. The hat, sculptured and painted here and there, the staring R, the blazoned arms, looked down on a vacant floor. Only, on a little stool by the main door, sat a quiet-faced man in black, who read, or pretended to read, in a little book, and never looked up. One of those men, blind, deaf, secretive, who fatten in the shadow of the great.

At length, while I stood confounded and full of shamed thought, — for I had seen the ante-

chamber of Richelieu's old hotel so crowded that he could not walk through it, — this man closed his book, rose, and came noiselessly towards me. "M. de Berault?" he said.

"Yes," I answered.

"His Eminence awaits you. Be good enough to follow me."

I did so, in a deeper stupor than before. For how could the Cardinal know that I was here? How could he have known when he gave the order? But I had short time to think of these things. We passed through two rooms, in one of which some secretaries were writing; we stopped at a third door. Over all brooded a silence which could be felt. The usher knocked, opened, and with his finger on his lip, pushed aside a curtain, and signed to me to enter. I did so, and found myself standing behind a screen.

"Is that M. de Berault?" asked a thin, high-pitched voice.

"Yes, Monseigneur," I answered, trembling.

"Then come, my friend, and talk to me."

I went round the screen; and I know not how it was, the watching crowd outside, the vacant

antechamber in which I had stood, the stillness, — all seemed concentrated here, and gave to the man I saw before me, a dignity which he had never possessed for me when the world passed through his doors, and the proudest fawned on him for a smile. He sat in a great chair on the farther side of the hearth, a little red skull-cap on his head, his fine hands lying motionless in his lap. The collar of lawn which fell over his red cape was quite plain, but the skirts of his red robe were covered with rich lace, and the order of the Holy Ghost shone on his breast. Among the multitudinous papers on the great table near him I saw a sword and pistols lying; and some tapestry that covered a little table behind him failed to hide a pair of spurred riding-boots. But he — in spite of these signs of trouble — looked towards me as I advanced, with a face mild and almost benign; a face in which I strove in vain to find traces of last night's passion. So that it flashed across me that if this man really stood — and afterwards I knew he did — on the thin razor-edge between life and death, between the supreme of earthly power, lord of France, and

arbiter of Europe, and the nothingness of the clod, he justified his fame. He gave weaker natures no room for triumph.

The thought was no sooner entertained than it was gone. "And so you are back at last, M. de Berault?" he said, gently. "I have been expecting to see you since nine this morning."

"Your Eminence knew then —" I muttered.

"That you returned to Paris by the Orleans gate last evening, alone?" He fitted together the ends of his fingers, and looked at me over them with inscrutable eyes. "Yes, I knew all that last night. And now of your mission? You have been faithful, and diligent, I am sure. Where is he?"

I stared at him, and was dumb. Somehow the strange things I had seen since I left my lodging, the surprises I had found awaiting me here, had driven my own fortunes, my own peril, out of my head, until this moment. Now, at his question, all returned with a rush. My heart heaved suddenly in my breast. I strove for a savour of the old hardihood; but for the moment I could not find a word.

"Well?" he said lightly, a faint smile lifting his mustache. "You do not speak. You left Auch with him on the twenty-fourth, M. de Berault. So much I know. And you reached Paris without him last night. He has not given you the slip?" with sudden animation.

"No, Monseigneur," I muttered.

"Ha! That is good," he answered, sinking back again in his chair. "For the moment — but I knew I could depend on you. And now where is he?" he continued. "What have you done with him? He knows much, and the sooner I know it, the better. Are your people bringing him, M. de Berault?"

"No, Monseigneur," I stammered, with dry lips. His very good humour, his benignity, appalled me. I knew how terrible would be the change, how fearful his rage, when I should tell him the truth. And yet that I, Gil de Berault, should tremble before any man! I spurred myself, as it were, to the task. "No, Your Eminence," I said, with the courage of despair. "I have not brought him, because I have set him free."

"Because you have — *what?*" he exclaimed. He leaned forward, his hands on the arm of his chair; and his glittering eyes, growing each instant smaller, seemed to read my soul.

"Because I have let him go," I repeated.

"And why?" he said, in a voice like the rasping of a file.

"Because I took him unfairly," I answered desperately. "Because, Monseigneur, I am a gentleman, and this task should have been given to one who was not. I took him, if you must know," I continued impatiently, — the fence once crossed, I was growing bolder, — "by dogging a woman's steps, and winning her confidence, and betraying it. And, whatever I have done ill in my life, — of which you were good enough to throw something in my teeth when I was last here, — I have never done that, and I will not!"

"And so you set him free?"

"Yes."

"After you had brought him to Auch?"

"Yes."

"And in point of fact saved him from falling into the hands of the commandant at Auch?"

"Yes," I answered desperately.

"Then what of the trust I placed in you, sirrah?" he rejoined, in a terrible voice; and stooping still farther forward, he probed me with his eyes. "You who prate of trust and confidence, who received your life on parole, and but for your promise to me would have been carrion this month past, answer me that! What of the trust I placed in you?"

"The answer is simple," I said, shrugging my shoulders with a touch of my old self. "I am here to pay the penalty."

"And do you think that I do not know why?" he retorted, striking his one hand on the arm of the chair with a force which startled me. "Because you have heard, Sir, that my power is gone! That I, who was yesterday the King's right hand, am to-day dried up, withered, and paralyzed! Because — but have a care! Have a care!" he continued not loudly, but in a voice like a dog's snarl. "You, and those others! Have a care I say, or you may find yourselves mistaken yet!"

"As Heaven shall judge me," I answered

solemnly, "that is not true. Until I reached Paris last night I knew nothing of this report. I came here with a single mind, to redeem my honour by placing again in Your Eminence's hands that which you gave me on trust."

For a moment he remained in the same attitude, staring at me fixedly. Then his face somewhat relaxed. "Be good enough to ring that bell," he said.

It stood on a table near me. I rang it, and a velvet-footed man in black came in, and gliding up to the Cardinal placed a paper in his hand. The Cardinal looked at it while the man stood with his head obsequiously bent; my heart beat furiously. "Very good," the Cardinal said, after a pause, which seemed to me to be endless. "Let the doors be thrown open."

The man bowed low, and retired behind the screen. I heard a little bell ring, somewhere in the silence, and in a moment the Cardinal stood up. "Follow me!" he said, with a strange flash of his keen eyes.

Astonished, I stood aside while he passed to the screen; then I followed him. Outside the

first door, which stood open, we found eight or nine persons, — pages, a monk, the major-domo, and several guards waiting like mutes. These signed to me to precede them, and fell in behind us, and in that order we passed through the first room and the second, where the clerks stood with bent heads to receive us. The last door, the door of the antechamber, flew open as we approached; a score of voices cried, "Place! Place for His Eminence!" We passed without pause through two lines of bowing lackeys, and entered — an empty room!

The ushers did not know how to look at one another. The lackeys trembled in their shoes. But the Cardinal walked on, apparently unmoved, until he had passed slowly half the length of the chamber. Then he turned himself about, looking first to one side, and then to another, with a low laugh of derision. "Father," he said, in his thin voice, "what does the psalmist say? 'I am become like a pelican in the wilderness, and like an owl that is in the desert!'"

The monk mumbled assent.

"And later, in the same psalm is it not writ-

ten, 'They shall perish, but thou shalt endure!'"

"It is so," the father answered. "Amen."

"Doubtless that refers to another life," the Cardinal continued, with his slow, wintry smile. "In the meantime we will go back to our books and our prayers, and serve God and the King in small things, if not in great. Come, father, this is no longer a place for us. *Vanitas vanitatum; omnia vanitas!* We will retire."

So, as solemnly as we had come, we marched back through the first and second and third doors, until we stood again in the silence of the Cardinal's chamber; he and I and the velvet-footed man in black. For a while Richelieu seemed to forget me. He stood brooding on the hearth, with his eyes on the embers. Once I heard him laugh; and twice he uttered in a tone of bitter mockery, the words, "Fools! Fools! Fools!"

At last he looked up, saw me, and started. "Ah!" he said. "I had forgotten you. Well, you are fortunate, M. de Berault. Yesterday I had a hundred clients. To-day I have only

one, and I cannot afford to hang him. But for your liberty — that is another matter."

I would have said something, but he turned abruptly to the table, and sitting down wrote a few lines on a piece of paper. Then he rang his bell, while I stood waiting and confounded.

The man in black came from behind the screen. "Take that letter and this gentleman to the upper guard-room," His Eminence said sharply. "I can hear no more," he continued wearily, raising his hand to forbid interruption. "The matter is ended, M. de Berault. Be thankful."

And in a moment I was outside the door, my head in a whirl, my heart divided between gratitude and resentment. Along several passages I followed my guide; everywhere finding the same silence, the same monastic stillness. At length, when I had begun to consider whether the Bastile or the Châtelet would be my fate, he stopped at a door, gave me the letter, and, lifting the latch, signed to me to enter.

I went in in amazement, and stopped in confusion. Before me, alone, just risen from a chair, with her face one moment pale, the next

red with blushes, stood Mademoiselle de Cocheforêt. I cried out her name.

"M. de Berault!" she said, visibly trembling. "You did not expect to see me?"

"I expected to see no one so little, Mademoiselle," I answered, striving to recover my composure.

"Yet you might have thought that we should not utterly desert you," she replied, with a reproachful humility which went to my heart. "We should have been base indeed, if we had not made some attempt to save you. I thank Heaven that it has so far succeeded that that strange man has promised me your life. You have seen him?" she continued eagerly, and in another tone, while her eyes grew suddenly large with fear.

"Yes, Mademoiselle, I have seen him," I said. "And he has given me my life."

"And?"

"And sent me to imprisonment."

"For how long?" she whispered.

"I do not know," I answered. "I expect, during the King's pleasure."

She shuddered. "I may have done more harm than good," she murmured, looking at me piteously. "But I did it for the best. I told him all, and — yes, perhaps I did harm."

But to hear her accuse herself thus, when she had made this long and lonely journey to save me; when she had forced herself into her enemy's presence, and had, as I was sure she had, abased herself for me, was more than I could bear. "Hush, Mademoiselle, hush!" I said, almost roughly. "You hurt me. You have made me happy: and yet I wish that you were not here, where I fear you have few friends, but back at Cocheforêt. You have done more than I expected, and a hundred times more than I deserved. But I was a ruined man before this happened. I am no more now, but I am still that; and I would not have your name pinned to mine on Paris lips. Therefore, good-bye. God forbid I should say more to you, or let you stay where foul tongues would soon malign you."

She looked at me in a kind of wonder; then with a growing smile, "It is too late," she said gently.

"Too late?" I exclaimed. "How, Mademoiselle?"

"Because — do you remember, M. de Berault, what you told me of your love story, by Agen? That it could have no happy ending? For the same reason I was not ashamed to tell mine to the Cardinal. By this time it is common property."

I looked at her as she stood facing me. Her eyes shone, but they were downcast. Her figure drooped, and yet a smile trembled on her lips. "What did you tell him, Mademoiselle?" I whispered, my breath coming quickly.

"That I loved," she answered boldly, raising her clear eyes to mine. "And therefore that I was not ashamed to beg, even on my knees. Nor ashamed to be with my lover, even in prison."

I fell on my knees, and caught her hand before the last word passed her lips. For the moment I forgot King and Cardinal, prison and the future, all — all except that this woman, so pure and so beautiful, so far above me in all things, loved me. For the moment, I say. Then I remembered myself. I stood up and thrust her from me, in a sudden revulsion of feeling. "You do

not know me," I said. "You do not know me. You do not know what I have done."

"That is what I do know," she answered, looking at me with a wondrous smile.

"Ah, but you do not," I cried. "And besides, there is this — this between us." And I picked up the Cardinal's letter. It had fallen on the floor.

She turned a shade paler. Then she said, "Open it! Open it! It is not sealed, nor closed."

I obeyed mechanically, dreading what I might see. Even when I had it open I looked at the finely scrawled characters with eyes askance. But at last I made it out. It ran thus: —

"The King's pleasure is, that M. de Berault, having mixed himself up with affairs of state, retire forthwith to the manor of Cocheforêt, and confine himself within its limits, until the King's pleasure be further known.

"RICHELIEU."

On the next day we were married. The same evening we left Paris, and I retraced, in her company, the road which I had twice traversed alone and in heaviness.

A fortnight later we were at Cocheforêt, in the brown woods under the southern mountains; and the great Cardinal, once more triumphant over his enemies, saw, with cold, smiling eyes, the world pass through his chamber. The flood-tide, which then set in, lasted thirteen years; in brief, until his death. For the world had learned its lesson, and was not to be deceived a second time. To this hour they call that day, which saw me stand for all his friends, "The day of Dupes."

THE END

COUNT HANNIBAL

SORORI
SUÂ CAUSSÂ CARAE
PIO ERGA MATREM AMORE
ETIAM CARIORI
HOC FRATER

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COUNT HANNIBAL.

CHAPTER I.

CRIMSON FAVOURS.

M. DE TAVANNES smiled. Mademoiselle averted her eyes, and shivered; as if the air, even of that close summer night, entering by the door at her elbow, chilled her. And then came a welcome interruption.

"Tavannes!"

"Sire!"

Count Hannibal rose slowly. The King had called, and he had no choice but to obey and go. Yet he hung a last moment over his companion, his hateful breath stirring her hair. "Our pleasure is cut short too soon, Mademoiselle," he said, in the tone and with the look she loathed. "But for a few hours only. We shall meet to-morrow. Or, it may be—earlier."

She did not answer, and "Tavannes!" the King repeated with violence. "Tavannes! Mordieu!" his Majesty continued, looking round furiously. "Will no one fetch him? Sacré nom, am I King, or a dog of a——"

"I come, sire!" Count Hannibal cried in haste.

For Charles, King of France, Ninth of the name, was none of the most patient; and scarce another in the Court would have ventured to keep him waiting so long. "I come, sire; I come!" Tavannes repeated, as he moved from her side.

He shouldered his way through the circle of courtiers, who barred the road to the presence, and in part hid Mademoiselle from observation. He pushed past the table at which Charles and the Comte de Rochefoucauld had been playing primero, and at which the latter still sat, trifling idly with the cards. Three more paces, and he reached the King, who stood in the *ruelle* with Rambouillet and the Italian Marshal. It was the latter who, a moment before, had summoned his Majesty from his game.

Mademoiselle, watching him go, saw so much; so much, and the King's roving eyes and haggard face, and the four figures, posed apart in the fuller light of the upper half of the Chamber. Then the circle of courtiers came together before her, and she sat back on her stool. A fluttering, long-drawn sigh escaped her. Now, if she could slip out and make her escape! Now—she looked round. She was not far from the door; to withdraw seemed easy. But a staring, whispering knot of gentlemen and pages blocked the way; and the girl, ignorant of the etiquette of the Court and with no more than a week's experience of Paris, had not the courage to rise and pass alone through the group.

She had come to the Louvre this Saturday evening under the wing of Madame d'Yverne, her *fiancé's* cousin. By ill hap Madame had been summoned to the Princess Dowager's closet, and perforce had left her. Still, Mademoiselle had her betrothed, and in

his charge had sat herself down to wait, nothing loth, in the great gallery, where all was bustle and gaiety and entertainment. For this, the seventh day of the fêtes, held to celebrate the marriage of the King of Navarre and Charles's sister—a marriage which was to reconcile the two factions of the Huguenots and the Catholics, so long at war—saw the Louvre as gay, as full, and as lively as the first of the fête days had found it; and in the humours of the throng, in the ceaseless passage of masks and maids of honour, guards and bishops, Swiss in the black, white and green of Anjou, and Huguenot nobles in more sombre habits, the country-bred girl had found recreation and to spare. Until gradually the evening had worn away and she had begun to feel nervous; and M. de Tignonville, her betrothed, placing her in the embrasure of a window, had gone to seek Madame.

She had waited for a time without much misgiving; expecting each moment to see him return. He would be back before she could count a hundred; he would be back before she could number the leagues that separated her from her beloved province, and the home by the Biscay Sea, to which even in that brilliant scene her thoughts turned fondly. But the minutes had passed, and passed, and he had not returned. Worse, in his place Tavannes—not the Marshal, but his brother Count Hannibal—had found her; he, whose odious court, at once a menace and an insult, had subtly enveloped her for a week past. He had sat down beside her, he had taken possession of her, and, profiting by her inexperience, had played on her fears and smiled at her dislike. Finally, whether she would or no, he had swept her with him into the Chamber. The rest had been an obsession, a night-

mare, from which only the King's voice summoning Tavannes to his side had relieved her.

Her aim now was to escape before he returned, and before another, seeing her alone, adopted his *rôle* and was rude to her. Already the courtiers about her were beginning to stare, the pages to turn and titter and whisper. Direct her gaze as she might, she met some eye watching her, some couple enjoying her confusion. To make matters worse, she presently discovered that she was the only woman in the Chamber; and she conceived the notion that she had no right to be there at that hour. At the thought her cheeks burned, her eyes dropped; the room seemed to buzz with her name, with gross words and jests, and gibes at her expense.

At last, when the situation had grown nearly unbearable, the group before the door parted, and Tignonville appeared. The girl rose with a cry of relief, and he came to her. The courtiers glanced at the two and smiled.

He did not conceal his astonishment at finding her there. "But, Mademoiselle, how is this?" he asked in a low voice. He was as conscious of the attention they attracted as she was, and as uncertain on the point of her right to be there. "I left you in the gallery. I came back, missed you, and——"

She stopped him by a gesture. "Not here!" she muttered, with suppressed impatience. "I will tell you outside. Take me—take me out, if you please, Monsieur, at once!"

He was as glad to be gone as she was to go. The group by the doorway parted; she passed through it, he followed. In a moment the two stood in the great gallery, above the Salle des Caryatides. The crowd

which had paraded here an hour before was gone, and the vast echoing apartment, used at that date as a guard-room, was well-nigh empty. Only at rare intervals, in the embrasure of a window or the recess of a door, a couple talked softly. At the farther end, near the head of the staircase which led to the hall below, and the courtyard, a group of armed Swiss lounged on guard. Mademoiselle shot a keen glance up and down, then she turned to her lover, her face hot with indignation.

"Why did you leave me?" she asked. "Why did you leave me, if you could not come back at once? Do you understand, sir," she continued, "that it was at your instance I came to Paris, that I came to this Court, and that I look to you for protection?"

"Surely," he said. "And——"

"And do you think Carlat and his wife fit guardians for me? Should I have come or thought of coming to this wedding, but for your promise, and Madame your cousin's? If I had not deemed myself almost your wife," she continued warmly, "and secure of your protection, should I have come within a hundred miles of this dreadful city? To which, had I my will, none of our people should have come."

"Dreadful? Pardieu, not so dreadful," he answered, smiling, and striving to give the dispute a playful turn. "You have seen more in a week than you would have seen at Vrillac in a lifetime, Mademoiselle."

"And I choke!" she retorted; "I choke! Do you not see how they look at us, at us Huguenots, in the street? How they, who live here, point at us and curse us? How the very dogs scent us out and snarl at our heels, and the babes cross themselves when we

go by? Can you see the Place des Gastines and not think what stood there? Can you pass the Grève at night and not fill the air above the river with screams and wailings and horrible cries—the cries of our people murdered on that spot?" She paused for breath, recovered herself a little, and in a lower tone, "For me," she said, "I think of Philippine de Luns by day and by night! The eaves are a threat to me; the tiles would fall on us had they their will; the houses nod to—to——"

"To what, Mademoiselle?" he asked, shrugging his shoulders and assuming a tone of cynicism.

"To crush us! Yes, Monsieur, to crush us!"

"And all this because I left you for a moment?"

"For an hour—or well-nigh an hour," she answered more soberly.

"But if I could not help it?"

"You should have thought of that—before you brought me to Paris, Monsieur. In these troublous times."

He coloured warmly. "You are unjust, Mademoiselle," he said. "There are things you forget; in a Court one is not always master of oneself."

"I know it," she answered drily, thinking of that through which she had gone.

"But you do not know what happened!" he returned with impatience. "You do not understand that I am not to blame. Madame d'Yverne, when I reached the Princess Dowager's closet, had left to go to the Queen of Navarre. I hurried after her, and found a score of gentlemen in the King of Navarre's chamber. They were holding a council, and they begged, nay, they compelled me to remain."

"And it was that which detained you so long?"

"To be sure, Mademoiselle."

"And not—Madame St. Lo?"

M. de Tignonville's face turned scarlet. The thrust in tierce was unexpected. This then was the key to Mademoiselle's spirt of temper. "I do not understand you," he stammered.

"How long were you in the King of Navarre's chamber, and how long with Madame St. Lo?" she asked with fine irony. "Or no, I will not tempt you," she went on quickly, seeing him hesitate. "I heard you talking to Madame St. Lo in the gallery while I sat within. And I know how long you were with her."

"I met Madame as I returned," he stammered, his face still hot, "and I asked her where you were. I did not know, Mademoiselle, that I was not to speak to ladies of my acquaintance."

"I was alone, and I was waiting."

"I could not know that—for certain," he answered, making the best of it. "You were not where I left you. I thought, I confess—that you had gone. That you had gone home."

"With whom? With whom?" she repeated pitilessly. "Was it likely? With whom was I to go? And yet it is true, I might have gone home had I pleased—with M. de Tavannes! Yes," she continued, in a tone of keen reproach and with the blood mounting to her forehead, "it is to that, Monsieur, you expose me! To be pursued, molested, harassed by a man whose look terrifies me, and whose touch I—I detest! To be addressed wherever I go by a man whose every word proves that he thinks me game for the hunter, and you a thing he may neglect. You are a man and you do not know, you cannot know

what I suffer! What I have suffered this week past whenever you have left my side!"

Tignonville looked gloomy. "What has he said to you?" he asked, between his teeth.

"Nothing I can tell you," she answered with a shudder. "It was he who took me into the Chamber."

"Why did you go?"

"Wait until he bids you do something," she answered. "His manner, his smile, his tone, all frighten me. And to-night, in all these there was a something worse, a hundred times worse than when I saw him last—on Thursday! He seemed to—to gloat on me," the girl stammered, with a flush of shame, "as if I were his! Oh, Monsieur, I wish we had not left our Poitou! Shall we ever see Vrillac again, and the fishers' huts about the port, and the sea beating blue against the long brown causeway?"

He had listened darkly, almost sullenly; but at this, seeing the tears gather in her eyes, he forced a laugh. "Why, you are as bad as M. de Rosny and the Vidame!" he said. "And they are as full of fears as an egg is of meat! Since the Admiral was wounded by that scoundrel on Friday, they think all Paris is in a league against us."

"And why not?" she asked, her cheek grown pale, her eyes reading his eyes.

"Why not? Why, because it is a monstrous thing even to think of!" Tignonville answered, with the confidence of one who did not use the argument for the first time. "Could they insult the King more deeply than by such a suspicion? A Borgia may kill his guests, but it was never a practice of the Kings of France! Pardieu, I have no patience with them!

They may lodge where they please, across the river, or without the walls if they choose, the Rue de l'Arbre Sec is good enough for me, and the King's name sufficient surety!"

"I know you are not apt to be fearful," she answered, smiling; and she looked at him with a woman's pride in her lover. "All the same, you will not desert me again, sir, will you?"

He vowed he would not, kissed her hand, looked into her eyes; then melting to her, stammering, blundering, he named Madame St. Lo. She stopped him.

"There is no need," she said, answering his look with kind eyes, and refusing to hear his protestations. "In a fortnight will you not be my husband? How should I distrust you? It was only that while she talked, I waited—I waited; and—and that Madame St. Lo is Count Hannibal's cousin. For a moment I was mad enough to dream that she held you on purpose. You do not think it was so?"

"She!" he cried sharply; and he winced, as if the thought hurt him. "Absurd! The truth is, Mademoiselle," he continued with a little heat, "you are like so many of our people! You think a Catholic capable of the worst."

"We have long thought so at Vrillac," she answered gravely.

"That's over now, if people would only understand. This wedding has put an end to all that. But I'm harking back," he continued awkwardly; and he stopped. "Instead, let me take you home."

"If you please. Carlat and the servants should be below."

He took her left hand in his right after the wont of the day, and with his other hand touching his

sword-hilt, he led her down the staircase, that by a single turn reached the courtyard of the palace. Here a mob of armed servants, of lacqueys, and foot-boys, some bearing torches, and some carrying their masters' cloaks and *galoshes*, loitered to and fro. Had M. de Tignonville been a little more observant, or a trifle less occupied with his own importance, he might have noted more than one face which looked darkly on him; he might have caught more than one overt sneer at his expense. But in the business of summoning Carlat—Mademoiselle de Vrillac's steward and major-domo—he lost the contemptuous "Christaudins!" that hissed from a footboy's lips, and the "Southern dogs!" that died in the moustachios of a bully in the livery of the King's brother. He was engaged in finding the steward, and in aiding him to cloak his mistress; then with a ruffling air, a new acquirement, which he had picked up since he came to Paris, he made a way for her through the crowd. A moment, and the three, followed by half a dozen armed servants, bearing pikes and torches, detached themselves from the throng, and crossing the courtyard, with its rows of lighted windows, passed out by the gate between the Tennis Courts, and so into the Rue des Fosses de St. Germain.

Before them, against a sky in which the last faint glow of evening still contended with the stars, the spire and pointed arches of the church of St. Germain rose darkly graceful. It was something after nine; the heat of the August day brooded over the crowded city, and dulled the faint distant ring of arms and armour that yet would make itself heard above the hush; a hush which was not silence so much as a subdued hum. As Mademoiselle passed the closed house

beside the Cloister of St. Germain where only the day before Admiral Coligny, the leader of the Huguenots, had been wounded, she pressed her escort's hand, and involuntarily drew nearer to him. But he laughed at her.

"It was a private blow," he said, answering her unspoken thought. "It is like enough the Guises sped it. But they know now what is the King's will, and they have taken the hint and withdrawn themselves. It will not happen again, Mademoiselle. For proof, see the guards"—they were passing the end of the Rue Bethizy, in the corner house of which, abutting on the Rue de l'Arbre Sec, Coligny had his lodgings—"whom the King has placed for his security. Fifty pikes under Cosseins."

"Cosseins?" she repeated. "But I thought Cosseins——"

"Was not wont to love us!" Tignonville answered with a confident chuckle. "He was not. But the dogs lick where the master wills, Mademoiselle. He was not, but he does. This marriage has altered all."

"I hope it may not prove an unlucky one!" she murmured. She felt impelled to say it.

"Not it!" he answered confidently. "Why should it?"

They stopped, as he spoke, before the last house, at the corner of the Rue St. Honoré opposite the Croix du Tiroir; which rose shadowy in the middle of the four ways. He hammered on the door.

"But," she said softly, looking in his face, "the change is sudden, is it not? The King was not wont to be so good to us!"

"The King was not King until now," he answered warmly. "That is what I am trying to persuade our

people. Believe me, Mademoiselle, you may sleep without fear; and early in the morning I will be with you. Carlat, have a care of your mistress until morning, and let Madame lie in her chamber. She is nervous to-night. There, sweet, until morning! God keep you, and pleasant dreams!"

He uncovered, and bowing over her hand, kissed it; and the door being open he would have turned away. But she lingered as if unwilling to enter. "There is—do you hear it—a stir in *that* quarter?" she said, pointing across the Rue St. Honoré. "What lies there?"

"Northward? The markets," he answered. "'Tis nothing. They say, you know, that Paris never sleeps. Good-night, sweet, and a fair awakening!"

She shivered as she had shivered under Tavannes' eye. And still she lingered, keeping him. "Are you going to your lodging at once?" she asked—for the sake, it seemed, of saying something.

"I?" he answered a little hurriedly. "No, I was thinking of paying Rochefoucauld the compliment of seeing him home. He has taken a new lodging to be near the Admiral; a horrid bare place in the Rue Bethizy, without furniture, but he would go into it to-day. And he has a sort of claim on my family, you know."

"Yes," she said simply. "Of course. Then I must not detain you. God keep you safe," she continued, with a faint quiver in her tone; and her lip trembled. "Good-night, and fair dreams, Monsieur."

He echoed the words gallantly. "Of you, sweet!" he cried; and turning away with a gesture of farewell, he set off on his return.

He walked briskly, nor did he look back, though

she stood awhile gazing after him. She was not aware that she gave thought to this; nor that it hurt her. Yet when bolt and bar had shot behind her, and she had mounted the cold, bare staircase of that day—when she had heard the dull echoing footsteps of her attendants as they withdrew to their lairs and sleeping-places, and still more when she had crossed the threshold of her chamber, and signed to Madame Carlat and her woman to listen—it is certain she felt a lack of something.

Perhaps the chill that possessed her came of that lack, which she neither defined nor acknowledged. Or possibly it came of the night air, August though it was; or of sheer nervousness, or of the remembrance of Count Hannibal's smile. Whatever its origin, she took it to bed with her; and long after the house slept round her, long after the crowded quarter of the Halles had begun to heave and the Sorbonne to vomit a black-frocked band, long after the tall houses in the gabled streets, from St. Antoine to Montmartre and from St. Denis on the north to St. Jacques on the south, had burst into rows of twinkling lights—nay, long after the Quarter of the Louvre alone remained dark, girdled by this strange midnight brightness—she lay awake. At length she too slept, and dreamed of home and the wide skies of Poitou, and her castle of Vrillac washed day and night by the Biscay tides.

CHAPTER II.

HANNIBAL DE SAULX, COMTE DE TAVANNES.

"TAVANNES!"

"Sire."

Tavannes, we know, had been slow to obey the summons. Emerging from the crowd he found that the King, with Retz and Rambouillet, his Marshal des Logis, had retired to the farther end of the Chamber; apparently Charles had forgotten that he had called. His head a little bent—he was tall and had a natural stoop—the King seemed to be listening to a low but continuous murmur of voices which proceeded from the door of his closet. One voice frequently raised was beyond doubt a woman's; a foreign accent, smooth and silky, marked another; a third, that from time to time broke in, wilful and impetuous, was the voice of Monsieur, the King's brother, Catherine de Médicis' favourite son. Tavannes, waiting respectfully two paces behind the King, could catch little that was said; but Charles, something more, it seemed, for on a sudden he laughed, a violent, mirthless laugh. And he clapped Rambouillet on the shoulder.

"There!" he said, with one of his horrible oaths, "'tis settled! 'Tis settled! Go, man, and take your orders! And you, M. de Retz," he continued, in a tone of savage mockery, "go, my lord, and give them!"

"I, sire?" the Italian Marshal answered in accents

of deprecation. There were times when the young King would show his impatience of the Italian ring, the Retzs and Biragues, the Strozzis and Gondys, with whom his mother surrounded him.

"Yes, you!" Charles answered. "You and my lady mother! And in God's name answer for it at the day!" he continued vehemently. "You will have it! You will not let me rest till you have it! Then have it, only see to it, it be done thoroughly! There shall not be one left to cast it in the King's teeth and cry, 'Et tu, Carole!' Swim, swim in blood if you will," he continued with growing wildness. "Oh, 'twill be a merry night! And it's true so far, you may kill fleas all day, but burn the coat, and there's an end. So burn it, burn it, and——" He broke off with a start as he discovered Tavannes at his elbow. "God's death, man!" he cried roughly, "who sent for you?"

"Your Majesty called me," Tavannes answered; while, partly urged by the King's hand, and partly anxious to escape, the others slipped into the closet and left them together.

"I sent for you? I called your brother, the Marshal!"

"He is within, sire," Tavannes answered, indicating the closet. "A moment ago I heard his voice."

Charles passed his shaking hand across his eyes. "Is he?" he muttered. "So he is! I heard it too. And—and a man cannot be in two places at once!" Then while his haggard gaze, passing by Tavannes, roved round the Chamber, he laid his hand on Count Hannibal's breast. "They give me no peace, Madame and the Guises," he whispered, his face hectic with excitement. "They will have it. They say that Coligny - they say that he beards me in my own pa-

lace. And—and, *mordieu,*" with sudden violence, "it's true! It's true enough! It was but to-day he was for making terms with me! With me, the King! Making terms! So it shall be, by God and Devil, it shall! But not six or seven! No, no. All! All! There shall not be one left to say to me, 'You did it!'"

"Softly, sire," Tavannes answered; for Charles had gradually raised his voice. "You will be observed."

For the first time the young King—he was but twenty-two years old, God pity him!—looked at his companion. "To be sure," he whispered; and his eyes grew cunning. "Besides, and after all, there's another way, if I choose. Oh, I've thought and thought, I'd have you know." And shrugging his shoulders, almost to his ears, he raised and lowered his open hands alternately, while his back hid the movement from the Chamber. "See-saw! See-saw!" he muttered. "And the King between the two, you see. That's Madame's king-craft. She's shown me that a hundred times. But look you, it is as easy to lower the one as the other," with a cunning glance at Tavannes' face, "or to cut off the right as the left. And—and the Admiral's an old man and will pass; and for the matter of that I like to hear him talk. He talks well. While the others, Guise and his kind, are young, and I've thought, oh, yes, I've thought—but there," with a sudden harsh laugh, "my lady mother will have it her own way. And for this time she shall, but, All! All! Even Foucauld, there! Do you mark him? He's sorting the cards. Do you see him—as he will be to-morrow, with the slit in his throat and his teeth showing? Why, God!" his voice rising

almost to a scream, "the candles by him are burning blue!" And with a shaking hand, his face convulsed, the young King clutched his companion's arm, and pinched it.

Count Hannibal shrugged his shoulders, but answered nothing.

"D'you think we shall see them afterwards?" Charles resumed, in a sharp, eager whisper. "In our dreams, man? Or when the watchman cries, and we awake, and the monks are singing lauds at St. Germain, and—and the taper is low?"

Tavannes' lip curled. "I don't dream, sire," he answered coldly, "and I seldom wake. For the rest, I fear my enemies neither alive nor dead."

"Don't you? By G—d, I wish I didn't," the young man exclaimed. His brow was wet with sweat. "I wish I didn't. But there, it's settled. They've settled it, and I would it were done! What do you think of—of it, man? What do you think of it, yourself?"

Count Hannibal's face was inscrutable. "I think nothing, sire," he said drily. "It is for your Majesty and your council to think. It is enough for me that it is the King's will."

"But you'll not flinch?" Charles muttered, with a quick look of suspicion. "But there," with a monstrous oath, "I know you'll not! I believe you'd as soon kill a monk—though, thank God," and he crossed himself devoutly, "there is no question of that—as a man. And sooner than a maiden."

"Much sooner, sire," Tavannes answered grimly. "If you have any orders in the monkish direction—no? Then your Majesty must not talk to me longer. M. de Rochefoucauld is beginning to wonder what is

keeping your Majesty from your game. And others are marking you, sire."

"By the Lord!" Charles exclaimed, a ring of wonder mingled with horror in his tone, "if they knew what was in our minds they'd mark us more! Yet, see Nançay there beside the door? He is unmoved. He looks to-day as he looked yesterday. Yet he has charge of the work in the palace——"

For the first time Tavannes allowed a movement of surprise to escape him. "In the palace?" he muttered. "Is it to be done here, too, sire?"

"Would you let some escape, to return by-and-by and cut our throats?" the King retorted with a strange spirt of fury; an incapacity to maintain the same attitude of mind for two minutes together was the most fatal weakness of his ill-balanced nature. "No. All! All!" he repeated with vehemence. "Didn't Noah people the earth with eight? But I'll not leave eight! My cousins, for they are blood-royal, shall live if they will recant. And my old nurse whether or no. And Paré, for no one else understands my complexion. And——"

"And Rochefoucauld, doubtless, sire?"

The King, whose eye had sought his favourite companion, withdrew it. He darted a glance at Tavannes. "Foucauld? Who said so?" he muttered jealously. "Not I! But we shall see. We shall see! And do you see that you spare no one, M. le Comte, without an order. That is your business."

"I understand, sire," Tavannes answered coolly. And after a moment's silence, seeing that the King had done with him, he bowed low and withdrew; watched by the circle, as all about a King were watched in the days when a King's breath meant life or death. and

his smile made the fortunes of men. As he passed Rochefoucauld, the latter looked up and nodded.

"What keeps brother Charles?" he muttered. "He's madder than ever to-night. Is it a masque or a murder he is planning?"

"The vapours," Tavannes answered with a sneer. "Old tales his old nurse has stuffed him withal. He'll come by-and-by, and 'twill be well if you can divert him."

"I will if he come," Rochefoucauld answered, shuffling the cards. "If not 'tis Chicot's business and he should attend to it. I'm tired and shall to bed."

"He will come," Tavannes answered, and moved, as if to go on. Then he paused for a last word. "He will come," he muttered, stooping and speaking under his breath, his eyes on the other's face. "But play him lightly. He is in an ugly mood. Please him, if you can, and it may serve."

The eyes of the two met an instant, and those of Foucauld—so the King called his Huguenot favourite—betrayed some surprise; for Count Hannibal and he were not intimate. But seeing that the other was in earnest, he raised his brows in acknowledgment. Tavannes nodded carelessly in return, looked an instant at the cards on the table, and passed on, pushed his way through the circle, and reached the door. He was lifting the curtain to go out, when Nançay, the Captain of the Guard, plucked his sleeve.

"What have you been saying to Foucauld, M. de Tavannes?" he muttered.

"I?"

"Yes," with a jealous glance, "you, M. le Comte."

Count Hannibal looked at him with the sudden ferocity that made the man a proverb at Court.

"What I chose, M. le Capitaine des Suisses!" he hissed. And his hand closed like a vice on the other's wrist. "What I chose, look you! And remember, another time, that I am not a Huguenot, and say what I please."

"But there is great need of care," Nançay protested, stammering and flinching. "And—and I have orders, M. le Comte."

"Your orders are not for me," Tavannes answered, releasing his arm with a contemptuous gesture. "And look you, man, do not cross my path to-night. You know our motto? Who touches my brother, touches Tavannes! Be warned by it."

Nançay scowled. "But the priests say, 'If your hand offend you, cut it off!'" he muttered.

Tavannes laughed, a sinister laugh. "If you offend me I'll cut your throat," he said; and with no ceremony he went out, and dropped the curtain behind him.

Nançay looked after him, his face pale with rage. "Curse him!" he whispered, rubbing his wrist. "If he were anyone else I would teach him! But he would as soon run you through in the presence as in the Pré aux Clercs! And his brother, the Marshal, has the King's ear! And Madame Catherine's too, which is worse!"

He was still fuming when an officer in the colours of Monsieur, the King's brother, entered hurriedly, and keeping his hand on the curtain, looked anxiously round the Chamber. As soon as his eye found Nançay, his face cleared. "Have you the reckoning?" he muttered

"There are seventeen Huguenots in the palace besides their Highnesses," Nançay replied, in the same

cautious tone. "Not counting two or three who are neither the one thing nor the other. In addition, there are the two Montmorencies; but they are to go safe for fear of their brother, who is not in the trap. He is too like his father, the old Bench-burner, to be lightly wronged! And besides, there is Paré, who is to go to his Majesty's closet as soon as the gates are shut. If the King decides to save anyone else, he will send him to his closet. So 'tis all clear and arranged here. If you are as forward outside, it will be well! Who deals with the gentleman with the tooth-pick?"

"The Admiral? Monsieur, Guise, and the Grand Prior; Cosseins and Besme have charge. 'Tis to be done first. Then the Provost will raise the town. He will have a body of stout fellows ready at three or four rendezvous, so that the fire may blaze up everywhere at once. Marcel, the ex-provost, has the same commission south of the river. Orders to light the town as for a frolic have been given, and the Halles will be ready."

Nançay nodded, reflected a moment, and then with an involuntary shudder, "God!" he exclaimed, "it will shake the world!"

"You think so?"

"Ay, will it not!" His next words showed that he bore Tavannes' warning in mind. "For me, my friend, I go in mail to-night," he said. "There will be many a score paid before morning, besides his Majesty's. And many a left-handed blow will be struck in the *mêlée!*"

The other crossed himself. "Grant none light here!" he said devoutly. And with a last look he nodded and went out.

In the doorway he jostled a person who was in the act of entering. It was M. de Tignonville, who, seeing Nançay at his elbow, saluted him, and stood looking round. The young man's face was flushed, his eyes were bright with unwonted excitement. "M. de Rochefoucauld?" he asked eagerly. "He has not left yet?"

Nançay caught the thrill in his voice, and marked the young man's flushed face, and altered bearing. He noted, too, the crumpled paper he carried half-hidden in his hand; and the Captain's countenance grew dark. He drew a step nearer and his hand reached softly for his dagger. But his voice when he spoke was smooth as the surface of the pleasure-loving Court, smooth as the externals of all things in Paris that summer evening. "He is here still," he said. "Have you news, M. de Tignonville?"

"News?"

"For M. de Rochefoucauld?"

Tignonville laughed. "No," he said. "I am here to see him to his lodging, that is all. News, Captain? What made you think so?"

"That which you have in your hand," Nançay answered, his fears relieved.

The young man blushed to the roots of his hair. "It is not for him," he said.

"I can see that, Monsieur," Nançay answered politely. "He has his successes, but all the billets-doux do not go one way."

The young man laughed, a conscious, flattered laugh. He was handsome, with such a face as women love, but there was a lack of ease in the way he wore his Court suit. It was a trifle finer, too, than accorded with Huguenot taste; or it looked the finer for

the way he wore it, even as Teligny's and Foucauld's velvet capes and stiff brocades lost their richness and became but the adjuncts, fitting and graceful, of the men. Odder still, as Tignonville laughed, half hiding and half revealing the dainty, scented paper in his hand, his clothes seemed smarter and he more awkward than usual. "It is from a lady," he admitted. "But a bit of badinage, I assure you, nothing more."

"Understood!" M. de Nançay murmured politely. "I congratulate you."

"But——"

"I say I congratulate you!"

"But it is nothing."

"Oh, I understand. And see, the King is about to rise. Go forward, Monsieur," he continued benevolently. "A young man should show himself. Besides his Majesty likes you well," he added with a leer. He had an unpleasant sense of humour, had his Majesty's Captain of the Guard; and this evening somewhat more than ordinary on which to exercise it.

Tignonville held too good an opinion of himself to suspect the other of badinage; and thus encouraged he pushed his way to the front of the circle. During his absence with his betrothed, the crowd in the Chamber had grown thin, the candles had burned an inch shorter in the sconces. But though many who had been there, had left, the more select remained, and the King's return to his seat had given the company a fillip. An air of feverish gaiety, common in the unhealthy life of the Court, prevailed. At a table abreast of the King, Montpensier and Marshal Cossé were dicing and disputing, with now a yell of glee,

and now an oath, that betrayed which way fortune inclined. At the back of the King's chair, Chicot, his gentleman-jester, hung over Charles's shoulder, now scanning his cards, and now making hideous faces that threw the onlookers into fits of laughter. Farther up the Chamber, at the end of the alcove, Marshal Tavannes—our Hannibal's brother—occupied a low stool, which was set opposite the open door of the closet. Through this doorway a slender foot, silk-clad, shot now and again into sight; it came, it vanished, it came again, the gallant Marshal striving at each appearance to rob it of its slipper, a dainty jewelled thing of crimson velvet. He failed thrice, a peal of laughter greeting each failure. At the fourth essay, he upset his stool and fell to the floor, but held the slipper. And not the slipper only, but the foot. Amid a flutter of silken skirts and dainty laces—while the hidden beauty shrilly protested—he dragged first the ankle, and then a shapely leg into sight. The circle applauded; the lady, feeling herself still drawn on, screamed loudly and more loudly. All save the King and his opponent turned to look. And then the sport came to a sudden end. A sinewy hand appeared, interposed, released; for an instant the dark, handsome face of Guise looked through the doorway. It was gone as soon as seen; it was there a second only. But more than one recognised it, and wondered. For was not the young Duke in evil odour with the King by reason of the attack on the Admiral? And had he not been chased from Paris only that morning and forbidden to return?

They were still wondering, still gazing, when abruptly—as he did all things—Charles thrust back his chair. "Foucauld, you owe me ten pieces!" he cried

with glee, and he slapped the table. "Pay, my friend; pay!"

"To-morrow, little master; to-morrow!" Rochefoucauld answered in the same tone. And he rose to his feet.

"To-morrow!" Charles repeated. "To-morrow?" And on the word his jaw fell. He looked wildly round. His face was ghastly.

"Well, sire, and why not?" Rochefoucauld answered in astonishment. And in his turn he looked round, wondering; and a chill fell on him. "Why not?" he repeated.

For a moment no one answered him: the silence in the Chamber was intense. Where he looked, wherever he looked, he met solemn, wondering eyes, such eyes as gaze on men in their coffins. "What has come to you all?" he cried with an effort. "What is the jest, for faith, sire, I don't see it?"

The King seemed incapable of speech, and it was Chicot who filled the gap. "It is pretty apparent," he said with a rude laugh. "The cock will lay and Foucauld will pay—to-morrow!"

The young nobleman's colour rose; between him and the Gascon gentleman was no love lost. "There are some debts I pay to-day," he cried haughtily. "For the rest, farewell my little master! When one does not understand the jest it is time to be gone."

He was half-way to the door, watched by all, when the King spoke. "Foucauld!" he cried in an odd, strangled voice. "Foucauld!" And the Huguenot favourite turned back, wondering.

"One minute!" the King continued in the same forced voice. "Stay till morning—in my closet. It is late now. We'll play away the rest of the night!"

"Your Majesty must excuse me," Rochefoucauld answered frankly. "I am dead asleep."

"You can sleep in the Garde-Robe," the King persisted.

"Thank you for nothing, sire!" was the gay answer. "I know that bed! I shall sleep longer and better in my own."

The King shuddered, but strove to hide the movement under a shrug of his shoulders. He turned away. "It is God's will!" he muttered. He was white to the lips.

Rochefoucauld did not catch the words. "Good night, sire," he cried. "Farewell, little master." And with a nod here and there, he passed to the door, followed by Mergey and Chamont, two gentlemen of his suite.

Nançay raised the curtain with an obsequious gesture. "Pardon me, M. le Comte," he said, "do you go to his Highness's?"

"For a few minutes, Nançay."

"Permit me to go with you. The guards may be set."

"Do so, my friend," Rochefoucauld answered. "Ah, Tignonville, is it you?"

"I am come to attend you to your lodging," the young man said. And he ranged up beside the other, as, the curtain fallen behind them, they walked along the gallery.

Rochefoucauld stopped and laid his hand on Tignonville's sleeve. "Thanks, dear lad," he said, "but I am going to the Princess Dowager's. Afterwards to his Highness's. I may be detained an hour or more. You will not like to wait so long."

M. de Tignonville's face fell ludicrously. "Well,

no," he said. "I—I don't think I could wait so long —to-night."

"Then come to-morrow night," Rochefoucauld answered with good nature.

"With pleasure," the other cried heartily, his relief evident. "Certainly. With pleasure." And, nodding good-night, they parted. While Rochefoucauld, with Nançay at his side and his gentlemen attending him, passed along the echoing and now empty gallery, the younger man bounded down the stairs to the great hall of the Caryatides, his face radiant. He for one was not sleepy.

CHAPTER III.

THE HOUSE NEXT THE "GOLDEN MAID."

WE have it on record that before the Comte de la Rochefoucauld left the Louvre that night he received the strongest hints of the peril which threatened him; and at least one written warning was handed to him by a stranger in black, and by him in turn was communicated to the King of Navarre. We are told further that when he took his final leave, about the hour of eleven, he found the courtyard brilliantly lighted, and the three companies of guards—Swiss, Scotch, and French—drawn up in ranked array from the door of the great hall to the gate which opened on the street. But, the chronicler adds, neither this precaution, sinister as it appeared to some of his suite, nor the grave farewell which Rambouillet, from his post at the gate, took of one of his gentlemen, shook that chivalrous soul or sapped its generous confidence.

M. de Tignonville was young and less versed in danger than the Governor of Rochelle; with him, had he seen so much, it might have been different. But he left the Louvre an hour earlier—at a time when the precincts of the palace, gloomy-seeming to us in the light cast by coming events, wore their wonted aspect. His thoughts, moreover, as he crossed the courtyard, were otherwise employed. So much so, indeed, that though he signed to his two servants to follow him, he seemed barely conscious what he was

doing; nor did he shake off his reverie until he reached the corner of the Rue Baillet. Here the voices of the Swiss who stood on guard opposite Coligny's lodgings, at the end of the Rue Bethizy, could be plainly heard. They had kindled a fire in an iron basket set in the middle of the road, and knots of them were visible in the distance, moving to and fro about their piled arms.

Tignonville paused before he came within the radius of the firelight, and turning, bade his servants take their way home. "I shall follow, but I have business first," he added curtly.

The elder of the two demurred. "The streets are not too safe," he said. "In two hours or less, my lord, it will be midnight. And then——"

"Go, booby; do you think I am a child?" his master retorted angrily. "I've my sword and can use it. I shall not be long. And do you hear, men, keep a still tongue, will you?"

The men, country fellows, obeyed reluctantly, and with a full intention of sneaking after him the moment he had turned his back. But he suspected them of this, and stood where he was until they had passed the fire, and could no longer detect his movements. Then he plunged quickly into the Rue Baillet, gained through it the Rue du Roule, and traversing that also turned to the right into the Rue Ferronerie, the main thoroughfare, east and west, of Paris. Here he halted in front of the long, dark outer wall of the Cemetery of the Innocents, in which, across the tombstones and among the sepulchres of dead Paris, the living Paris of that day, bought and sold, walked, gossiped, and made love.

About him things were to be seen that would have

seemed stranger to him had he been less strange to the city. From the quarter of the markets north of him, a quarter which fenced in the cemetery on two sides, the same dull murmur proceeded, which Mademoiselle de Vrillac had remarked an hour earlier. The sky above the cemetery glowed with reflected light, the cause of which was not far to seek, for every window of the tall houses that overlooked it, and the huddle of booths about it, contributed a share of the illumination. At an hour late even for Paris, an hour when honest men should have been sunk in slumber, this strange brilliance did for a moment perplex him; but the past week had been so full of fêtes, of masques and frolics, often devised on the moment and dependent on the King's whim, that he set this also down to such a cause, and wondered and no more.

The lights in the houses flung their radiance high, and did not serve his purpose; but beside the closed gate of the cemetery, between two stalls, was a votive lamp burning before an image of the Mother and Child. He crossed to this, and assuring himself by a glance to right and left that he stood in no danger from prowlers, he drew a note from his breast. It had been slipped into his hand in the gallery before he saw Mademoiselle to her lodging; it had been in his possession barely an hour. But brief as its contents were, and easily committed to memory, he had perused it thrice already.

"At the house next the 'Golden Maid,' Rue Cinq Diamants, an hour before midnight, you may find the door open should you desire to talk farther with C. St. L."

As he read it for the fourth time the light of the

lamp fell athwart his face; and even as his fine clothes had never seemed to fit him worse than when he faintly denied the imputations of gallantry launched at him by Nançay, so his features had never looked less handsome than they did now. The glow of vanity which warmed his cheek as he read the message, the smile of conceit which wreathed his lips, bespoke a nature not of the most noble; or the lamp did him less than justice. Presently he kissed the note, and hid it. He waited until the clock of St. Jacques struck the hour before midnight; and then moving forward he turned to the right by way of the narrow neck leading to the Rue Lombard. He walked in the kennel here, his sword in his hand and his eyes looking to right and left; for the place was notorious for robberies. But though he saw more than one figure lurking in a doorway or under the arch that led to a passage, it vanished on his nearer approach. In less than a minute he reached the southern end of the street that bore the odd title of the Five Diamonds.

Situate in the crowded quarter of the butchers, and almost in the shadow of their famous church, this street—which farther north was continued in the Rue Quimcampoix—presented in those days a not uncommon mingling of poverty and wealth. On one side of the street a row of lofty gabled houses built under Francis the First, sheltered persons of good condition; on the other, divided from these by the width of the road and a reeking kennel, a row of pent-houses, the hovels of cobblers and sausage-makers, leaned against shapeless timber houses which tottered upwards in a medley of sagging roofs and bulging gutters. Tignonville was strange to the place, and nine nights out of ten he would have been at a disadvantage. But,

thanks to the tapers that to-night shone in many windows, he made out enough to see that he need search only the one side; and with a beating heart he passed along the row of newer houses, looking eagerly for the sign of the "Golden Maid."

He found it at last; and then for a moment he stood puzzled. The note said, next door to the "Golden Maid," but it did not say on which side. He scrutinised the nearer house, but he saw nothing to determine him; and he was proceeding to the farther, when he caught sight of two men, who, ambushed behind a horse-block on the opposite side of the roadway, seemed to be watching his movements. Their presence flurried him; but much to his relief his next glance at the houses showed him that the door of the farther one was unlatched. It stood slightly ajar, permitting a beam of light to escape into the street.

He stepped quickly to it—the sooner he was within the house the better—pushed the door open and entered. As soon as he was inside he tried to close the entrance behind him, but he found he could not; the door would not shut. After a brief trial he abandoned the attempt and passed quickly on, through a bare lighted passage which led to the foot of a staircase, equally bare. He stood at this point an instant and listened, in the hope that Madame's maid would come to him. At first he heard nothing save his own breathing; then a gruff voice from above startled him. "This way, Monsieur," it said. "You are early, but not too soon!"

So Madame trusted her footman! M. de Tignonville shrugged his shoulders; but after all, it was no affair of his, and he went up. Half-way to the top, however, he stood, an oath on his lips. Two men

had entered by the open door below—even as he had entered! And as quietly!

The imprudence of it! The imprudence of leaving the door so that it could not be closed! He turned and descended to meet them, his teeth set, his hand on his sword, one conjecture after another whirling in his brain. Was he beset? Was it a trap? Was it a rival? Was it chance? Two steps he descended; and then the voice he had heard before cried again, but more imperatively, "No, Monsieur, this way! Did you not hear me? This way and be quick, if you please. By-and-by there will be a crowd, and then the more we have dealt with the better!"

He knew now that he had made a mistake, that he had entered the wrong house; and naturally his impulse was to continue his descent and secure his retreat. But the pause had brought the two men who had entered face to face with him, and they showed no signs of giving way. On the contrary.

"The room is above, Monsieur," the foremost said, in a matter-of-fact tone, and with a slight salutation. "After you, if you please," and he signed to him to return.

He was a burly man, grim and truculent in appearance, and his follower was like him. Tignonville hesitated, then turned and ascended. But as soon as he had reached the landing where they could pass him, he turned again.

"I have made a mistake, I think," he said. "I have entered the wrong house."

"Are you for the house next the 'Golden Maid,' Monsieur?"

"Yes."

"Rue Cinq Diamants, Quarter of the Boucherie?"

"Yes."

"No mistake then," the stout man replied firmly. "You are early, that is all. You have arms, I see. Maillard!"—to the person whose voice Tignonville had heard at the head of the stairs—"A white sleeve, and a cross for Monsieur's hat, and his name on the register. Come, make a beginning! Make a beginning, man."

"To be sure, Monsieur. All is ready."

"Then lose no time, I say. Here are others, also early in the good cause. Gentlemen, welcome! Welcome all who are for the true faith! Death to the heretics! 'Kill, and no quarter!' is the word to-night!"

"Death to the heretics!" the last comers cried in chorus. "Kill and no quarter! At what hour, M. le Prévot?"

"At day-break," the Provost answered importantly. "But have no fear, the tocsin will sound. The King and our good man M. de Guise have all in hand. A white sleeve, a white cross, and a sharp knife shall rid Paris of the vermin! Gentlemen of the quarter, the word of the night is 'Kill, and no quarter! Death to the Huguenots!'"

"Death! Death to the Huguenots! Kill, and no quarter!" A dozen—the room was beginning to fill—waved their weapons and echoed the cry.

Tignonville had been fortunate enough to apprehend the position—and the peril in which he stood—before Maillard advanced to him bearing a white linen sleeve. In the instant of discovery his heart had stood a moment, the blood had left his cheeks; but with some faults, he was no coward, and he managed to hide his emotion. He held out his left arm, and suffered the beadle to pass the sleeve over

it and to secure the white linen above the elbow. Then at a gesture he gave up his velvet cap, and saw it decorated with a white cross of the same material. "Now the register, Monsieur," Maillard continued briskly; and waving him in the direction of a clerk, who sat at the end of the long table, having a book and an ink-horn before him, he turned to the next comer.

Tignonville would fain have avoided the ordeal of the register, but the clerk's eye was on him. He had been fortunate so far, but he knew that the least breath of suspicion would destroy him, and summoning his wits together he gave his name in a steady voice. "Anne Desmartins." It was his mother's maiden name, and the first that came into his mind.

"Of Paris?"

"Recently; by birth, of the Limousin."

"Good, Monsieur," the clerk answered, writing in the name. And he turned to the next. "And you, my friend?"

CHAPTER IV.

THE EVE OF THE FEAST.

It was Tignonville's salvation that the men who crowded the long white-walled room, and exchanged vile boasts under the naked flaring lights, were of all classes. There were butchers, natives of the surrounding quarter whom the scent of blood had drawn from their lairs; and there were priests with hatchet faces, who whispered in the butchers' ears. There were gentlemen of the robe, and plain mechanics, rich merchants in their gowns, and bare-armed ragpickers, sleek choristers, and shabby led-captains; but differ as they might in other points, in one thing all were alike. From all, gentle or simple, rose the same cry for blood, the same aspiration to be first equipped for the fray. In one corner a man of rank stood silent and apart, his hand on his sword, the working of his face alone betraying the storm that reigned within. In another, a Norman horse-dealer talked in low whispers with two thieves. In a third, a gold-wire drawer addressed an admiring group from the Sorbonne; and meantime the middle of the floor grew into a seething mass of muttering, scowling men, through whom the last comers, thrust as they might, had much ado to force their way.

And from all under the low ceiling rose a ceaseless hum, though none spoke loud. "Kill! kill! kill!" was the burden; the accompaniment such profanities and blasphemies as had long disgraced the Paris pul-

pits, and day by day had fanned the bigotry—already at a white heat—of the Parisian populace. Tignonville turned sick as he listened, and would fain have closed his ears. But for his life he dared not. And presently a cripple in a beggar's garb, a dwarfish, filthy creature with matted hair, twitched his sleeve, and offered him a whetstone.

"Are you sharp, noble sir?" he asked with a leer. "Are you sharp? It's surprising how the edge goes on the bone. A cut and thrust? Well, every man to his taste. But give me a broad butcher's knife and I'll ask no help, be it man, woman, or child!"

A bystander, a lean man in rusty black, chuckled as he listened. "But the woman or the child for choice, eh, Jehan?" he said. And he looked to Tignonville to join in the jest.

"Ay, give me a white throat for choice!" the cripple answered, with horrible zest. "And there'll be delicate necks to prick to-night! Lord, I think I hear them squeal! You don't need it, sir?" he continued, again proffering the whetstone. "No? Then I'll give my blade another whet, in the name of our Lady, the Saints, and good Father Pezelay!"

"Ay, and give me a turn!" the lean man cried, proffering his weapon. "May I die if I do not kill one of the accursed for every finger of my hands!"

"And toe of my feet!" the cripple answered, not to be outdone. "And toe of my feet! A full score!"

"'Tis according to your sins!" the other, who had something of the air of a Churchman, answered. "The more heretics killed, the more sins forgiven. Remember that, brother, and spare not if your soul be burdened! They blaspheme God and call Him paste! In the paste of their own blood," he con-

tinued ferociously, "I will knead them and roll them out, saith the good Father Pezelay, my master!"

The cripple crossed himself. "Whom God keep," he said. "He is a good man. But you are looking ill, noble sir?" he continued, peering curiously at the young Huguenot.

"'Tis the heat," Tignonville muttered. "The night is stifling, and the lights make it worse. I will go nearer the door."

He hoped to escape them; he had some hope even of escaping from the room and giving the alarm. But when he had forced his way to the threshold, he found it guarded by two pikemen; and glancing back to see if his movements were observed—for he knew that his agitation might have awakened suspicion—he found that the taller of the two whom he had left, the black-garbed man with the hungry face, was watching him a-tiptoe, over the shoulders of the crowd.

With that, and the sense of his impotence, the lights began to swim before his eyes. The catastrophe that overhung his party, the fate so treacherously prepared for all whom he loved and all with whom his fortunes were bound up, confused his brain almost to delirium. He strove to think, to calculate chances, to imagine some way in which he might escape from the room, or from a window might cry the alarm. But he could not bring his mind to a point. Instead, in lightning flashes he foresaw what must happen: his betrothed in the hands of the murderers, the fair face that had smiled on him frozen with terror; brave men, the fighters of Montauban, the defenders of Angely, strewn dead through the dark lanes of the city. And now a gust of passion, and now a shudder of fear, seized him; and in any other

assembly his agitation must have led to detection. But in that room were many twitching faces and trembling hands. Murder, cruel, midnight, and most foul, wrung even from the murderers her toll of horror. While some, to hide the nervousness they felt, babbled of what they would do, others betrayed by the intentness with which they awaited the signal, the dreadful anticipations that possessed their souls.

Before he had formed any plan, a movement took place near the door. The stairs shook beneath the sudden trampling of feet, a voice cried "De par le Roi! De par le Roi!" and the babel of the room died down. The throng swayed and fell back on either hand, and Marshal Tavannes entered, wearing half armour, with a white sash; he was followed by six or eight gentlemen in like guise. Amid cries of "Jarnac! Jarnac!"—for to him the credit of that famous fight, nominally won by the King's brother, was popularly given—he advanced up the room, met the Provost of the merchants, and began to confer with him. Apparently he asked the latter to select some men who could be trusted on a special mission, for the Provost looked round and beckoned to his side one or two of higher rank than the herd, and then one or two of the most truculent aspect.

Tignonville trembled lest he should be singled out. He had hidden himself as well as he could at the rear of the crowd by the door; but his dress, so much above the common, rendered him conspicuous. He fancied that the Provost's eye ranged the crowd for him; and to avoid it and efface himself he moved a pace to his left.

The step was fatal. It saved him from the Provost, but it brought him face to face and eye to eye with

Count Hannibal, who stood in the first rank at his brother's elbow. Tavannes stared an instant as if he doubted his eyesight. Then, as doubt gave slow place to certainty, and surprise to amazement, he smiled. And after a moment he looked another way.

Tignonville's heart gave a great bump and seemed to stand still. The lights whirled before his eyes, there was a roaring in his ears. He waited for the word that should denounce him. It did not come. And still it did not come; and Marshal Tavannes was turning. Yes, turning, and going; the Provost, bowing low, was attending him to the door; his suite were opening on either side to let him pass. And Count Hannibal? Count Hannibal was following also, as if nothing had occurred. As if he had seen nothing!

The young man caught his breath. Was it possible that he had imagined the start of recognition, the steady scrutiny, the sinister smile? No; for as Tavannes followed the others, he hung an instant on his heel, their eyes met again, and once more he smiled. In the next breath he was gone through the doorway, his spurs rang on the stairs; and the babel of the crowd, unchecked by the great man's presence, broke out anew, and louder.

Tignonville shuddered. He was saved as by a miracle, saved he did not know how. But the respite, though its strangeness diverted his thoughts for a while, brought short relief. The horrors which impended over others surged afresh into his mind, and filled him with a maddening sense of impotence. To be one hour, only one short half-hour without! To run through the sleeping streets, and scream in the dull ears which a King's flatteries had stopped as

with wool! To go up and down and shake into life the guests whose royal lodgings daybreak would turn to a shambles reeking with their blood! They slept, the gentle Teligny, the brave Pardaillan, the gallant Rochefoucauld, Piles the hero of St. Jean, while the cruel city stirred rustling about them, and doom crept whispering to the door. They slept, they and a thousand others, gentle and simple, young and old; while the half-mad Valois shifted between two opinions, and the Italian woman, accursed daughter of an accursed race, cried "Hark!" at her window, and looked eastwards for the dawn.

And the women? The woman he was to marry? And the others? In an access of passion he thrust aside those who stood between, he pushed his way, disregarding complaints, disregarding opposition, to the door. But the pikes lay across it, and he could not utter a syllable to save his life. He would have flung himself on the door-keepers, for he was losing control of himself; but as he drew back for the spring, a hand clutched his sleeve, and a voice he loathed hummed in his ear.

"No, fair play, noble sir; fair play!" the cripple Jehan muttered, forcibly drawing him aside. "All start together, and it's no man's loss. But if there is any little business," he continued, lowering his tone and peering with a cunning look into the other's face, "of your own, noble sir, or your friends', anything or anybody you want despatched, count on me. It were better, perhaps, you didn't appear in it yourself, and a man you can trust——"

"What do you mean?" the young man cried, recoiling from him.

"No need to look surprised, noble sir," the lean

man, who had joined them, answered in a soothing tone. "Who kills to-night does God service, and who serves God much may serve himself a little. 'Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn,' says good Father Pezelay."

"Hear, hear!" the cripple chimed in eagerly, his impatience such that he danced on his toes. "He preaches as well as the good father his master! So frankly, noble sir, what is it? What is it? A woman grown ugly? A rich man grown old, with perchance a will in his chest? Or a young heir that stands in my lord's way? Whichever it be, or whatever it be, trust me and our friend here, and my butcher's gully shall cut the knot."

Tignonville shook his head.

"But something there is," the lean man persisted obstinately; and he cast a suspicious glance at Tignonville's clothes. It was evident that the two had discussed him, and the motives of his presence there. "Have the dice proved fickle, my lord, and are you for the jewellers' shops on the bridge to fill your purse again? If so, take my word, it were better to go three than one, and we'll enlist."

"Ay, we know shops on the bridge where you can plunge your arm elbow-deep in gold," the cripple muttered, his eyes sparkling greedily. "There's Baillet's, noble sir! There's a shop for you! And there's the man's shop who works for the King. He's lame like me. And I know the way to all. Oh, it will be a merry night if they ring before the dawn. It must be near daybreak now. And what's that?"

Ay, what was it? A score of voices called for silence; a breathless hush fell on the crowd. A moment the fiercest listened, with parted lips and

starting eyes. Then, "It was the bell!" cried one, "let us out!" "It was not!" cried another. "It was a pistol shot!" "Anyhow let us out!" the crowd roared in chorus; "let us out!" And they pressed in a furious mass towards the door, as if they would force it, signal or no signal.

But the pikemen stood fast, and the throng, checked in their first rush, turned on one another, and broke into wrangling and disputing; boasting, and calling Heaven and the saints to witness how thoroughly, how pitilessly, how remorselessly they would purge Paris of this leprosy when the signal did sound. Until again above the babel a man cried "Silence!" and again they listened. And this time, dulled by walls and distance, but unmistakable by the ears of fear or hate, the heavy note of a bell came to them on the hot night-air. It was the boom, sullen and menacing, of the death signal.

The door-keepers lowered their pikes, and with a wild rush as of wolves swarming on their prey, the band stormed the door, and thrust and struggled and battled a way down the narrow staircase, and along the narrow passage. "A bas les Huguenots! Mort aux Huguenots!" they shouted; and shrieking, sweating, spurning with vile hands viler faces, they poured pell-mell into the street, and added their clamour to the boom of the tocsin that, as by magic and in a moment, turned the streets of Paris into a hell of blood and cruelty. For as it was here, so it was in a dozen other quarters.

Quickly as they streamed out—and to have issued more quickly would have been impossible—fiercely as they pushed and fought and clove their way, Tignonville was of the foremost. And for a moment, seeing

the street clear before him and almost empty, the Huguenot thought that he might do something. He might outstrip the stream of rapine, he might carry the alarm; at worst he might reach his betrothed before harm befel her. But when he had sped fifty yards, his heart sank. True, none passed him; but under the spell of the alarm-bell the stones themselves seemed to turn to men. Houses, courts, alleys, the very churches vomited men. In a twinkling the street was alive with men, roared with them as with a rushing tide, gleamed with their lights and weapons, thundered with the volume of their thousand voices. He was no longer ahead, men were running before him, behind him, on his right hand and on his left. In every side-street, every passage, men were running; and not men only, but women, children, furious creatures without age or sex. And all the time the bell tolled overhead, tolled faster and faster, and louder and louder; and shots and screams, and the clash of arms, and the fall of strong doors began to swell the maelstrom of sound.

He was in the Rue St. Honoré now, and speeding westward. But the flood still rose with him, and roared abreast of him. Nay, it outstripped him. When he came, panting, within sight of his goal, and lacked but a hundred paces of it, he found his passage barred by a dense mass of people moving slowly to meet him. In the heart of the press the light of a dozen torches shone on half as many riders mailed and armed; whose eyes, as they moved on, and the furious gleaming eyes of the rabble about them, never left the gabled roofs on their right. On these from time to time a white-clad figure showed itself, and passed from chimney-stack to chimney-stack, or,

stooping low, ran along the parapet. Every time that this happened, the men on horseback pointed upwards and the mob foamed with rage.

Tignonville groaned, but he could not help. Unable to go forward, he turned, and with others hurrying, shouting, and brandishing weapons, he pressed into the Rue du Roule, passed through it, and gained the Bethizy. But here, as he might have foreseen, all passage was barred at the Hôtel Ponthieu by a horde of savages, who danced and yelled and sang songs round the Admiral's body, which lay in the middle of the way; while to right and left men were bursting into houses and forcing new victims into the street. The worst had happened there, and he turned panting, regained the Rue St. Honoré and, crossing it and turning left-handed, darted through side streets until he came again into the main thoroughfare a little beyond the Croix du Tiroir, that marked the corner of Mademoiselle's house.

Here his last hope left him. The street swarmed with bands of men hurrying to and fro as in a sacked city. The scum of the Halles, the rabble of the quarter poured this way and that, here at random, there swayed and directed by a few knots of men-at-arms, whose corselets reflected the glare of a hundred torches. At one time and within sight, three or four houses were being stormed. On every side rose heart-rending cries, mingled with brutal laughter, with savage jests, with cries of "To the river!" The most cruel of cities had burst its bounds and was not to be stayed; nor would be stayed until the Seine ran red to the sea, and leagues below, in pleasant Normandy hamlets, men, for fear of the pestilence, pushed the corpses from the bridges with poles and boat-hooks.

All this Tignonville saw, though his eyes, leaping the turmoil, looked only to the door at which he had left Mademoiselle a few hours earlier. There a crowd of men pressed and struggled; but from the spot where he stood he could see no more. That was enough, however. Rage nerved him, and despair; his world was dying round him. If he could not save her he would avenge her. Recklessly he plunged into the tumult; blade in hand, with vigorous blows he thrust his way through, his white sleeve and the white cross in his hat gaining him passage until he reached the fringe of the band who beset the door. Here his first attempt to pass failed; and he might have remained hampered by the crowd if a squad of archers had not ridden up. As they spurred to the spot, heedless over whom they rode, he clutched a stirrup, and was borne with them into the heart of the crowd. In a twinkling he stood on the threshold of the house, face to face and foot to foot with Count Hannibal, who stood also on the threshold, but with his back to the door, which, unbarred and unbolted, gaped open behind him.

CHAPTER V.

A ROUGH WOOING.

THE young man had caught the delirium that was abroad that night. The rage of the trapped beast was in his heart, his hand held a sword. To strike blindly, to strike without question the first who withstood him was the wild-beast instinct; and if Count Hannibal had not spoken on the instant, the Marshal's brother had said his last word in the world.

Yet as he stood there, a head above the crowd, he seemed unconscious alike of Tignonville and the point that all but pricked his breast. Swart and grim-visaged, his harsh features distorted by the glare which shone upon him, he looked beyond the Huguenot to the sea of tossing arms and raging faces that surged about the saddles of the horsemen. It was to these he spoke.

"Begone, dogs!" he cried, in a voice that startled the nearest, "or I will whip you away with my stirrup-leathers! Do you hear? Begone! This house is not for you! Burn, kill, plunder where you will, but go hence!"

"But 'tis on the list!" one of the wretches yelled. "'Tis on the list!" And he pushed forward until he stood at Tignonville's elbow.

"And has no cross!" shrieked another, thrusting himself forward in his turn. "See you, let us by,

whoever you are! In the King's name, kill! It has no cross!"

"Then," Tavannes thundered, "will I nail you for a cross to the front of it! No cross, say you? I will make one of you, foul crow!"

And as he spoke, his arm shot out; the man recoiled, his fellow likewise. But one of the mounted archers took up the matter.

"Nay, but, my lord," he said—he knew Tavannes —"it is the King's will there be no favour shown to-night to any, small or great. And this house is registered, and is full of heretics."

"And has no cross!" the rabble urged in chorus. And they leapt up and down in their impatience, and to see the better. "And has no cross!" they persisted. They could understand that. Of what use crosses, if they were not to kill where there was no cross? Daylight was not plainer.

Tavannes' face grew dark, and he shook his finger at the archer who had spoken. "Rogue," he cried, "does the King's will run here only? Are there no other houses to sack or men to kill, that you must beard me? And favour? You will have little of mine, if you do not budge and take your vile tail with you! Off! Or must I cry 'Tavannes!' and bid my people sweep you from the streets?"

The foremost rank hesitated, awed by his manner and his name; while the rearmost, attracted by the prospect of easier pillage, had gone off already. The rest wavered; and another and another broke away. The archer who had put himself forward saw which way the wind was blowing, and he shrugged his shoulders. "Well, my lord, as you will," he said sullenly. "All the same I would advise you to close

the door and bolt and bar. We shall not be the last to call to-day." And he turned his horse in ill-humour, and forced it, snorting and plunging, through the crowd.

"Bolt and bar?" Tavannes cried after him in fury. "See you my answer to that!" And turning on the threshold, "Within there!" he cried. "Open the shutters and set lights, and the table! Light, I say; light! And lay on quickly, if you value your lives! And throw open, for I sup with your mistress to-night, if it rain blood without! Do you hear me, rogues? Set on!"

He flung the last word at the quaking servants; then he turned again to the street. He saw that the crowd was melting, and, looking in Tignonville's face, he laughed aloud. "Does Monsieur sup with us?" he said. "To complete the party? Or will he choose to sup with our friends yonder? It is for him to say. I confess, for my part," with an awful smile, "their hospitality seems a trifle crude, and boisterous."

Tignonville looked behind him and shuddered. The same horde which had so lately pressed about the door had found a victim lower down the street, and, as Tavannes spoke, came driving back along the roadway, a mass of tossing lights and leaping, running figures, from the heart of which rose the screams of a creature in torture. So terrible were the sounds that Tignonville leant half swooning against the door-post; and even the iron heart of Tavannes seemed moved for a moment.

For a moment only: then he looked at his companion, and his lip curled. "You'll join us, I think?" he said with an undisguised sneer. "Then, after

you, Monsieur. They are opening the shutters. Doubtless the table is laid, and Mademoiselle is expecting us. After you, Monsieur, if you please. A few hours ago I should have gone first, for you, in this house"—with a sinister smile—"were at home! Now, we have changed places."

Whatever he meant by the gibe—and some smack of an evil jest lurked in his tone—he played the host so far as to urge his bewildered companion along the passage and into the living-chamber on the left, where he had seen from without that his orders to light and lay were being executed. A dozen candles shone on the board, and lit up the apartment. What the house contained of food and wine had been got together and set on the table; from the low, wide window, beetle-browed and diamond-paned, which extended the whole length of the room and looked on the street at the height of a man's head above the roadway, the shutters had been removed—doubtless by trembling and reluctant fingers. To such eyes of passers-by as looked in, from the inferno of driving crowds and gleaming weapons which prevailed outside—and not outside only, but throughout Paris—the brilliant room and the laid table must have seemed strange indeed!

To Tignonville, all that had happened, all that was happening, seemed a dream: a dream his entrance under the gentle impulsion of this man who dominated him; a dream Mademoiselle standing behind the table with blanched face and stony eyes; a dream the cowering servants huddled in a corner beyond her; a dream his silence, her silence, the moment of waiting before Count Hannibal spoke.

When he did speak it was to count the servants.

"One, two, three, four, five," he said. "And two of them women. Mademoiselle is but poorly attended. Are there not"—and he turned to her—"some lacking?"

The girl opened her lips twice, but no sound issued. The third time, "Two went out," she muttered in a hoarse, strangled voice, "and have not returned."

"And have not returned?" he answered, raising his eyebrows. "Then I fear we must not wait for them. We might wait long!" And turning sharply to the panic-stricken servants, "Go you to your places! Do you not see that Mademoiselle waits to be served?"

The girl shuddered and spoke.

"Do you wish me," she muttered, in the same strangled tone, "to play this farce—to the end?"

"The end may be better, Mademoiselle, than you think," he answered, bowing. And then to the miserable servants, who hung back afraid to leave the shelter of their mistress's skirts, "To your places!" he cried. "Set Mademoiselle's chair. Are you so remiss on other days? If so," with a look of terrible meaning, "you will be the less loss! Now, Mademoiselle, may I have the honour? And when we are at table we can talk."

He extended his hand, and, obedient to his gesture, she moved to the place at the head of the table, but without letting her fingers come into contact with his. He gave no sign that he noticed this, but he strode to the place on her right, and signed to Tignonville to take that on her left. "Will you not be seated?" he continued. For she kept her feet.

She turned her head stiffly, until for the first time her eyes looked into his. A shudder more violent

than the last shook her. "Had you not better—kill us at once?" she whispered. The blood had forsaken even her lips. Her face was the face of a statue —white, beautiful, lifeless.

"I think not," he said gravely. "Be seated, and let us hope for the best. And you, sir," he continued, turning to Carlat, "serve your mistress with wine. She needs it."

The steward filled for her, and then for each of the men, his shaking hand spilling as much as it poured. Nor was this strange. Above the din and uproar of the street, above the crash of distant doors, above the tocsin that still rang from the reeling steeple of St. Germain's, the great bell of the Palais on the island had just begun to hurl its note of doom upon the town. A woman crouching at the end of the chamber burst into hysterical weeping, but, at a glance from Tavannes' terrible eye, was mute again.

Tignonville found voice at last. "Have they—killed the Admiral?" he muttered, his eyes on the table.

"M. Coligny? An hour ago."

"And Teligny?"

"Him also."

"M. de Rochefoucauld?"

"They are dealing with M. le Comte now, I believe," Tavannes answered. "He had his chance, and cast it away." And he began to eat.

The man at the table shuddered. The woman continued to look before her, but her lips moved as if she prayed. Suddenly a rush of feet, a roar of voices surged past the window; for a moment the glare of the torches which danced ruddily on the walls of the room, showed a severed head borne above the multi-

tude on a pike. Mademoiselle, with a low cry, made an effort to rise, but Count Hannibal grasped her wrist and she sank back half fainting. Then the nearer clamour sank a little, and the bells, unchallenged, flung their iron tongues above the maddened city. In the east the dawn was growing; soon its grey light would fall on cold hearths, on battered doors and shattered weapons, on hordes of wretches drunk with greed and hate.

When he could be heard, "What are you going to do with us?" the man asked hoarsely.

"That depends," Count Hannibal replied after a moment's thought.

"On what?"

"On Mademoiselle de Vrillac."

The other's eyes gleamed with passion. He leaned forward. "What has she to do with it?" he cried. And he stood up and sat down again in a breath.

Tavannes raised his eyebrows with a blandness that seemed at odds with his harsh visage. "I will answer that question by another question," he replied. "How many are there in the house, my friend?"

"You can count."

Tavannes counted again. "Seven?" he said.

Tignonville nodded impatiently.

"Seven lives?"

"Well?"

"Well, Monsieur, you know the King's will?"

"I can guess it," the other replied furiously. And he cursed the King, and the King's mother, calling her Jezebel.

"You can guess it?" Tavannes answered; and then with sudden heat, as if that which he had to say could not be said even by him in cold blood, "Nay, you

know it! You heard it from the archer at the door. You heard him say, 'No favour, no quarter for man, for woman, or for child. So says the King.' You heard it, but you fence with me. Foucauld, with whom his Majesty played to-night, hand to hand and face to face—Foucauld is dead! And you think to live? You?" he continued, lashing himself into passion. "I know not by what chance you came where I saw you an hour gone, nor by what chance you came by that and that"—pointing with accusing finger to the badges the Huguenot wore. "But this I know! I have but to cry your name from yonder casement, nay, Monsieur, I have but to stand aside when the mob go their rounds from house to house, as they will go presently, and you will perish as certainly as you have hitherto escaped!"

For the second time Mademoiselle turned and looked at him. "Then," she whispered, with white lips, "to what end this—mockery?"

"To the end that seven lives may be saved, Mademoiselle," he answered, bowing.

"At a price?" she muttered.

"At a price," he answered. "A price which women do not find it hard to pay—at Court. 'Tis paid every day for pleasure or a whim, for rank or the *entrée*, for robes and gewgaws. Few, Mademoiselle, are privileged to buy a life; still fewer, seven!"

She began to tremble. "I would rather die—seven times!" she cried, her voice quivering. And she tried to rise, but sat down again.

"And these?" he said, indicating the servants.

"Far, far rather!" she repeated passionately.

"And Monsieur? And Monsieur?" he urged with stern persistence, while his eyes passed lightly from

her to Tignonville and back to her again, their depths inscrutable. "If you love Monsieur, Mademoiselle, and I believe you do——"

"I can die with him!" she cried.

"And he with you?"

She writhed in her chair.

"And he with you?" Count Hannibal repeated, with emphasis; and he thrust forward his head. "For that is the question. Think, think, Mademoiselle. It is in my power to save from death him whom you love; to save you; to save this *canaille*, if it so please you. It is in my power to save him, to save you, to save all; and I will save all—at a price! If, on the other hand, you deny me that price, I will as certainly leave all to perish, as perish they will, before the sun that is now rising sets to-night!"

Mademoiselle looked straight before her, the flicker of a dreadful prescience in her eyes. "And the price?" she muttered. "The price?"

"You, Mademoiselle."

"I?"

"Yes, you! Nay, why fence with me?" he continued gently. "You knew it, you have said it. You have read it in my eyes these seven days."

She did not speak, move, or seem to breathe. As he said, she had foreseen, she had known the answer. But Tignonville, it seemed, had not. He sprang to his feet. "M. de Tavannes," he cried, "you are a villain!"

"Monsieur?"

"You are a villain! But you shall pay for this!" the young man continued vehemently. "You shall not leave this room alive! You shall pay for this insult!"

"Insult?" Tavannes answered in apparent surprise; and then, as if comprehension broke upon him, "Ah! Monsieur mistakes me," he said, with a generous sweep of his hand. "And Mademoiselle also, perhaps? Oh! be content, she shall have bell, book, and candle; she shall be tied as tight as Holy Church can tie her! Or, if she please, and one survive, she shall have a priest of her own church—you call it a church? She shall have whichever of the two will serve her better. 'Tis one to me! But for paying me, Monsieur," he continued with irony in voice and manner; "when, I pray you? In Eternity? For if you refuse my offer, you have done with time. Now? I have but to sound this whistle"—he touched a silver whistle which hung at his breast—"and there are those within hearing will do your business before you make two passes. Dismiss the notion, sir, and understand. You are in my power. Paris runs with blood, as noble as yours, as innocent as hers. If you would not perish with the rest, decide! And quickly! For what you have seen are but the forerunners, what you have heard are but the gentle whispers that predict the gale. Do not parley too long; so long that even I may no longer save you."

"I would rather die!" Mademoiselle moaned, her face covered. "I would rather die!"

"And see him die?" he answered quietly. "And see these die? Think, think, child!"

"You will not do it!" she gasped. She shook from head to foot.

"I shall do nothing," he answered firmly. "I shall but leave you to your fate, and these to theirs. In the King's teeth I dare save my wife and her people; but no others. You must choose—and quickly."

One of the frightened women—it was Mademoiselle's tiring-maid, a girl called Javette—made a movement, as if to throw herself at her mistress's feet. Tignonville drove her to her place with a word. He turned to Count Hannibal. "But, M. le Comte," he said, "you must be mad! Mad, to wish to marry her in this way! You do not love her. You do not want her. What is she to you more than other women?"

"What is she to you more than other women?" Tavannes retorted in a tone so sharp and incisive that Tignonville started, and a faint touch of colour crept into the wan cheek of the girl, who sat between them, the prize of the contest. "What is she more to you than other women? Is she more? And yet—you want her!"

"She is more to me," Tignonville answered.

"Is she?" the other retorted, with a ring of keen meaning. "Is she? But we bandy words and the storm is rising, as I warned you it would rise. Enough for you that I *do* want her. Enough for you that I will have her. She shall be the wife, the willing wife, of Hannibal de Tavannes—or I leave her to her fate, and you to yours!"

"Ah, God!" she moaned. "The willing wife!"

"Ay, Mademoiselle, the willing wife," he answered sternly. "Or no man's wife!"

CHAPTER VI.

WHO TOUCHES TAVANNES?

In saying that the storm was rising Count Hannibal had said no more than the truth. A new mob had a minute before burst from the eastward into the Rue St. Honoré; and the roar of its thousand voices swelled louder than the importunate clangour of the bells. Behind its moving masses the dawn of a new day—Sunday, the 24th of August, the feast of St. Bartholomew—was breaking over the Bastille, as if to aid the crowd in its cruel work. The gabled streets, the lanes, and gothic courts, the stifling wynds, where the work awaited the workers, still lay in twilight; still the gleam of the torches, falling on the house-fronts, heralded the coming of the crowd. But the dawn was growing, the sun was about to rise. Soon the day would be here, giving up the lurking fugitive whom darkness, more pitiful, had spared, and stamping with legality the horrors that night had striven to hide.

And with day, with the full light, killing would grow more easy, escape more hard. Already they were killing on the bridge where the rich goldsmiths lived, on the wharves, on the river. They were killing at the Louvre, in the courtyard under the King's eyes, and below the windows of the Médicis. They were killing in St. Martin and St. Denis and St. Antoine; wherever hate, or bigotry, or private malice impelled the hand. From the whole city went up

a din of lamentation, and wrath, and foreboding. From the Cour des Miracles, from the markets, from the Boucherie, from every haunt of crime and misery, hordes of wretched creatures poured forth; some to rob on their own account, and where they listed, none gainsaying; more to join themselves to one of the armed bands whose business it was to go from street to street, and house to house, quelling resistance, and executing through Paris the high justice of the King.

It was one of these swollen bands which had entered the street while Tavannes spoke; nor could he have called to his aid a more powerful advocate. As the deep "A bas! A bas!" rolled like thunder along the fronts of the houses, as the more strident "Tuez! Tuez!" drew nearer and nearer, and the lights of the oncoming multitude began to flicker on the shuttered gables, the fortitude of the servants gave way. Madame Carlat, shivering in every limb, burst into moaning; the tiring-maid, Javette, flung herself in terror at Mademoiselle's knees, and, writhing herself about them, shrieked to her to save her, only to save her! One of the men moved forward on impulse, as if he would close the shutters; and only old Carlat remained silent, praying mutely with moving lips and a stern, set face.

And Count Hannibal? As the glare of the links in the street grew brighter, and ousted the sickly daylight, his form seemed to dilate. He stilled the shrieking woman by a glance. "Choose! Mademoiselle, and quickly!" he said. "For I can only save my wife and her people! Quick, for the pinch is coming, and 'twill be no boy's play."

A shot, a scream from the street, a rush of racing feet before the window seconded his words.

"Quick, Mademoiselle!" he cried. And his breath came a little faster. "Quick, before it be too late! Will you save life, or will you kill?"

She looked at her lover with eyes of agony, dumbly questioning him. But he made no sign, and only Tavannes marked the look. "Monsieur has done what he can to save himself," he said with a sneer. "He has donned the livery of the King's servants; he has said, 'Whoever perishes, I will live!' But——"

"Curse you!" the young man cried, and, stung to madness, he tore the cross from his cap and flung it on the ground. He seized his white sleeve and ripped it from shoulder to elbow. Then, when it hung by the string only, he held his hand.

"Curse you!" he cried furiously. "I will not at your bidding! I may save her yet! I will save her!"

"Fool!" Tavannes answered—but his words were barely audible above the deafening uproar. "Can you fight a thousand? Look! Look!" and seizing the other's wrist he pointed to the window. The street glowed like a furnace in the red light of torches, raised on poles above a sea of heads; an endless sea of heads, and gaping faces, and tossing arms which swept on and on, and on and by. For a while it seemed that the torrent would flow past them and would leave them safe. Then came a check, a confused outcry, a surging this way and that; the torches reeled to and fro, and finally with a dull roar of "Open! Open!" the mob faced about to the house and the lighted window.

For a second it seemed that even Count Hannibal's iron nerves shook a little. He stood between the sullen group that surrounded the disordered table and the maddened rabble, that gloated on the victims be-

fore they tore them to pieces. "Open! Open!" the mob howled: and a man dashed in the window with his pike.

In that crisis Mademoiselle's eyes met Tavannes' for the fraction of a second. She did not speak; nor, had she retained the power to frame the words, would they have been audible. But something she must have looked, and something of import, though no other than he marked or understood it. For in a flash he was at the window and his hand was raised for silence.

"Back!" he thundered. "Back, knaves!" And he whistled shrilly. "Do what you will," he continued in the same tone, "but not here! Pass on! Pass on!—do you hear?"

But the crowd were not to be lightly diverted. With a persistence brutal and unquestioning they continued to howl "Open! Open!" while the man who had broken the window the moment before, Jehan, the cripple with the hideous face, seized the lead-work, and tore away a great piece of it. Then laying hold of a bar, he tried to drag it out, setting one foot against the wall below.

Tavannes saw what he did, and his frame seemed to dilate with the fury and violence of his character. "Dogs!" he shouted, "must I call out my riders and scatter you? Must I flog you through the streets with stirrup-leathers? I am Tavannes, beware of me! I have claws and teeth and I bite!" he continued, the scorn in his words exceeding even the rage of the crowd, at which he flung them. "Kill where you please, rob where you please, but not where I am! Or I will hang you by the heels on Montfaucon, man by man! I will flay your backs. Go! go! I am Tavannes!"

But the mob, cowed for a moment by the thunder of his voice, by his arrogance and recklessness, showed at this that their patience was exhausted. With a yell which drowned his tones they swayed forward; a dozen thundered on the door, crying, "In the King's name!" As many more tore out the remainder of the casement, seized the bars of the window, and strove to pull them out or to climb between them. Jehan, the cripple, with whom Tignonville had rubbed elbows at the rendezvous, led the way.

Count Hannibal watched them a moment, his harsh face bent down to them, his features plain in the glare of the torches. But when the cripple, raised on the others' shoulders, and emboldened by his adversary's inactivity, began to squeeze himself through the bars, Tavannes raised a pistol, which he had held unseen behind him, cocked it at leisure, and levelled it at the foul face which leered close to his. The dwarf saw the weapon and tried to retreat; but it was too late. A flash, a scream, and the wretch, shot through the throat, flung up his hands, and fell back into the arms of a lean man in black who had lent him his shoulder to ascend.

For a few seconds the smoke of the pistol filled the window and the room. There was a cry that the Huguenots were escaping, that the Huguenots were resisting, that it was a plot; and some shouted to guard the back and some to watch the roof, and some to be gone. But when the fumes cleared away, the mob saw, with stupor, that all was as it had been. Count Hannibal stood where he had stood before, a grim smile on his lips.

"Who comes next?" he cried in a tone of mockery. "I have more pistols!" And then with a sudden

change to ferocity, "You dogs!" he went on. "You scum of a filthy city, sweepings of the Halles! Do you think to beard me? Do you think to frighten me or murder me? I am Tavannes, and this is my house, and were there a score of Huguenots in it, you should not touch one, nor harm a hair of his head! Begone, I say again, while you may! Seek women and children, and kill them. But not here!"

For an instant the mingled scorn and brutality of his words silenced them. Then from the rear of the crowd came an answer—the roar of an arquebuse. The ball whizzed past Count Hannibal's head, and, splashing the plaster from the wall within a pace of Tignonville, dropped to the ground.

Tavannes laughed. "Bungler!" he cried. "Were you in my troop I would dip your trigger-finger in boiling oil to teach you to shoot! But you weary me, dogs. I must teach you a lesson, must I?" And he lifted a pistol and levelled it. The crowd did not know whether it was the one he had discharged or another, but they gave back with a sharp gasp. "I must teach you, must I?" he continued with scorn. "Here Bigot, Badelon, drive me these blusterers! Rid the street of them! A Tavannes! A Tavannes!"

Not by word or look had he before this betrayed that he had supports. But as he cried the name, a dozen men armed to the teeth, who had stood motionless under the Croix du Tiroir, fell in a line on the right flank of the crowd. The surprise for those nearest them was complete. With the flash of the pikes before their eyes, with the cold steel in fancy between their ribs, they fled every way, uncertain how many pursued, or if any pursuit there was. For a moment the mob, which a few minutes before had seemed so

formidable that a regiment might have quailed before it, bade fair to be routed by a dozen pikes.

And so, had all in the crowd been what he termed them, the rabble and sweepings of the streets, it would have been. But in the heart of it, and felt rather than seen, were a handful of another kidney; Sorbonne students and fierce-eyed priests, with three or four mounted archers, the nucleus that, moving through the streets, had drawn together this concourse. And these with threats and curses and gleaming eyes stood fast, even Tavannes' dare-devils recoiling before the tonsure. The check thus caused allowed those who had budged a breathing space. They rallied behind the black robes, and began to stone the pikes; who in their turn withdrew until they formed two groups, standing on their defence, the one before the window the other before the door.

Count Hannibal had watched the attack and the check, as a man watches a play; with smiling interest. In the panic, the torches had been dropped or extinguished, and now between the house and the sullen crowd which hung back, yet grew moment by moment more dangerous, the daylight fell cold on the littered street and the cripple's huddled form prone in the gutter. A priest raised on the shoulders of the lean man in black began to harangue the mob, and the dull roar of assent, the brandished arms which greeted his appeal, had their effect on Tavannes' men. They looked to the window, and muttered among themselves. It was plain that they had no stomach for a fight with the Church, and were anxious for the order to withdraw.

But Count Hannibal gave no order, and, much as his people feared the cowls, they feared him more.

Meanwhile the speaker's eloquence rose higher; he pointed with frenzied gestures to the house. The mob groaned, and suddenly a volley of stones fell among the pikemen, whose corselets rattled under the shower. The priest seized that moment. He sprang to the ground, and to the front. He caught up his robe and waved his hand, and the rabble, as if impelled by a single will, rolled forward in a huge one-fronted thundering wave, before which the two handfuls of pikemen—afraid to strike, yet afraid to fly—were swept away like straws upon the tide.

But against the solid walls and oak-barred door of the house the wave beat, only to fall back again, a broken, seething mass of brandished arms and ravening faces. One point alone was vulnerable, the window, and there in the gap stood Tavannes. Quick as thought he fired two pistols into the crowd; then, while the smoke for a moment hid all, he whistled.

Whether the signal was a summons to his men to fight their way back—as they were doing to the best of their power—or he had resources still unseen, was not to be known. For as the smoke began to rise, and while the rabble before the window, cowed by the fall of two of their number, were still pushing backward instead of forward, there rose behind them strange sounds—yells, and the clatter of hoofs, mingled with screams of alarm. A second, and into the loose skirts of the crowd came charging helter-skelter, pell-mell, a score of galloping, shrieking, cursing horsemen, attended by twice as many footmen, who clung to their stirrups or to the tails of the horses, and yelled and whooped, and struck in unison with the maddened riders.

"On! on!" the foremost shrieked, rolling in his

saddle, and foaming at the mouth. "Bleed in August, bleed in May! Kill!" And he fired a pistol among the rabble, who fled every way to escape his rearing, plunging charger.

"Kill! Kill!" cried his followers, cutting the air with their swords, and rolling to and fro on their horses in drunken emulation. "Bleed in August, bleed in May!"

"On! On!" cried the leader, as the crowd which beset the house fled every way before his reckless onset. "Bleed in August, bleed in May!"

The rabble fled, but not so quickly but that one or two were ridden down, and this for an instant checked the riders. Before they could pass on, "Ohé!" cried Count Hannibal from his window. "Ohé!" with a shout of laughter, "ride over them, dear brother! Make me a clean street for my wedding!"

Marshal Tavannes—for he, the hero of Jarnac, was the leader of this wild orgy—turned that way, and strove to rein in his horse. "What ails them?" he cried, as the maddened animal reared upright, its iron hoofs striking fire from the slippery pavement.

"They are rearing like thy Bayard!" Count Hannibal answered. "Whip them, whip them for me! Tavannes! Tavannes!"

"What? This canaille?"

"Ay, that canaille!"

"Who touches my brother, touches Tavannes!" the Marshal replied, and spurred his horse among the rabble, who had fled to the sides of the street and now strove hard to efface themselves against the walls. "Begone, dogs; begone!" he cried, still hunting them. And then, "You would bite, would you?"

And snatching another pistol from his boot, he fired it among them, careless whom he hit. "Ha! ha! That stirs you, does it!" he continued as the wretches fled headlong. "Who touches my brother, touches Tavannes! On! On!"

Suddenly, from a doorway near at hand, a sombre figure darted into the roadway, caught the Marshal's rein, and for a second checked his course. The priest —for a priest it was, Father Pezelay, the same who had addressed the mob—held up a warning hand. "Halt!" he cried, with burning eyes. "Halt, my lord! It is written, thou shalt not spare the Canaanitish woman. 'Tis not to spare the King has given command and a sword, but to kill! 'Tis not to harbour, but to smite! To smite!"

"Then smite I will!" the Marshal retorted, and with the butt of his pistol struck the zealot down. Then, with as much indifference as he would have treated a Huguenot, he spurred his horse over him, with a mad laugh at his jest. "Who touches my brother, touches Tavannes!" he yelled. "Touches Tavannes! On! On! Bleed in August, bleed in May!"

"On!" shouted his followers, striking about them in the same desperate fashion. They were young nobles who had spent the night feasting at the Palace, and, drunk with wine and mad with excitement, had left the Louvre at daybreak to rouse the city. "A Jarnac! A Jarnac!" they cried, and some saluted Count Hannibal as they passed. And so, shouting and spurring and following their leader, they swept away down the now empty street, carrying terror and a flame wherever their horses bore them that morning.

Tavannes, his hands on the ledge of the shattered window, leaned out laughing, and followed them with his eyes. A moment, and the mob was gone, the street was empty; and one by one, with sheepish faces, his pikemen emerged from the doorways and alleys in which they had taken refuge. They gathered about the three huddled forms which lay prone and still in the gutter: or, not three—two. For even as they approached them, one, the priest, rose slowly and giddily to his feet. He turned a face bleeding, lean, and relentless towards the window at which Tavannes stood. Solemnly, with the sign of the cross, and with uplifted hands, he cursed him in bed and at board, by day and by night, in walking, in riding, in standing, in the day of battle, and at the hour of death. The pikemen fell back appalled, and hid their eyes; and those who were of the north crossed themselves, and those who came from the south bent two fingers horse-shoe fashion. But Hannibal de Tavannes laughed; laughed in his moustache, his teeth showing, and bade them move that carrion to a distance, for it would smell when the sun was high. Then he turned his back on the street, and looked into the room.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE AMPHITHEATRE.

THE movements of the women had overturned two of the candles; a third had guttered out. The three which still burned, contending pallidly with the daylight that each moment grew stronger, imparted to the scene the air of a debauch too long sustained. The disordered board, the wan faces of the servants cowering in their corner, Mademoiselle's frozen look of misery, all increased the likeness; which a common exhaustion so far strengthened that when Tavannes turned from the window, and, flushed with his triumph, met the others' eyes, his seemed the only vigour, and he the only man in the company. True, beneath the exhaustion, beneath the collapse of his victims, there burned passions, hatreds, repulsions, as fierce as the hidden fires of the volcano; but for the time they smouldered ash-choked and inert.

He flung the discharged pistols on the table. "If yonder raven speak truth," he said, "I am like to pay dearly for my wife, and have short time to call her wife. The more need, Mademoiselle, for speed, therefore. You know the old saying, 'Short signing, long seisin'? Shall it be my priest, or your minister?"

M. de Tignonville started forward. "She promised nothing!" he cried. And he struck his hand on the table.

Count Hannibal smiled, his lip curling. "That," he replied, "is for Mademoiselle to say."

"But if she says it? If she says it, Monsieur? What then?"

Tavannes drew forth a comfit-box, such as it was the fashion of the day to carry, as men of a later time carried a snuff-box. He slowly chose a prune. "If she says it?" he answered. "Then M. de Tignonville has regained his sweetheart. And M. de Tavannes has lost his bride."

"You say so?"

"Yes. But——"

"But what?"

"But she will not say it," Tavannes replied coolly.

"Why not?"

"Why not?"

"Yes, Monsieur, why not?" the younger man repeated trembling.

"Because, M. de Tignonville, it is not true."

"But she did not speak!" Tignonville retorted, with passion—the futile passion of the bird which beats its wings against a cage. "She did not speak. She could not promise, therefore."

Tavannes ate the prune slowly, seemed to give a little thought to its flavour, approved it a true Agen plum, and at last spoke. "It is not for you to say whether she promised," he returned drily, "nor for me. It is for Mademoiselle."

"You leave it to her?"

"I leave it to her to say whether she promised."

"Then she must say No!" Tignonville cried in a tone of triumph and relief. "For she did not speak. Mademoiselle, listen!" he continued, turning with outstretched hands and appealing to her with passion.

"Do you hear? Do you understand? You have but to speak to be free! You have but to say the word, and Monsieur lets you go! In God's name, speak! Speak then, Clotilde! Oh!" with a gesture of despair, as she did not answer, but continued to sit stony and hopeless, looking straight before her, her hands picking convulsively at the fringe of her girdle. "She does not understand! Fright has stunned her! Be merciful, Monsieur. Give her time to recover, to know what she does. Fright has turned her brain."

Count Hannibal smiled. "I knew her father and her uncle," he said, "and in their time the Vrillacs were not wont to be cowards. Monsieur forgets, too," he continued with fine irony, "that he speaks of my betrothed."

"It is a lie!"

Tavannes raised his eyebrows. "You are in my power," he said. "For the rest, if it be a lie, Mademoiselle has but to say so."

"You hear him?" Tignonville cried. "Then speak, Mademoiselle! Clotilde, speak! Say you never spoke, you never promised him!"

The young man's voice quivered with indignation, with rage, with pain; but most, if the truth be told, with shame—the shame of a position strange and unparalleled. For in proportion as the fear of death instant and violent was lifted from him, reflection awoke, and the situation in which he stood took uglier shape. It was not so much love that cried to her, love that suffered, anguished by the prospect of love lost; as in the highest natures it might have been. Rather it was the man's pride which suffered; the pride of a high spirit which found itself helpless between the hammer and the anvil, in a position so false

that hereafter men might say of the unfortunate that he had bartered his mistress for his life. He had not! But he had perforce to stand by; he had to be passive under stress of circumstances, and by the sacrifice, if she consummated it, he would in fact be saved.

There was the pinch. No wonder that he cried to her in a voice which roused even the servants from their lethargy of fear. "Say it!" he cried. "Say it, before it be too late. Say you did not promise!"

Slowly she turned her face to him. "I cannot," she whispered; "I cannot. Go," she continued, a spasm distorting her features. "Go, Monsieur. Leave me. It is over."

"What?" he exclaimed. "You promised him?"

She bowed her head.

"Then," the young man cried, in a transport of resentment, "I will be no part of the price. See! There! And there!" He tore the white sleeve wholly from his arm, and, rending it in twain, flung it on the floor and trampled on it. "It shall never be said that I stood by and let you buy my life! I go into the street and I take my chance." And he turned to the door.

But Tavannes was before him. "No!" he said; "you will stay here, M. de Tignonville!" And he set his back against the door.

The young man looked at him, his face convulsed with passion. "I shall stay here?" he cried. "And why, Monsieur? What is it to you if I choose to perish?"

"Only this," Tavannes retorted. "I am answerable to Mademoiselle now, in an hour I shall be answerable to my wife—for your life. Live, then, Monsieur;

you have no choice. In a month you will thank me —and her."

"I am your prisoner?"

"Precisely."

"And I must stay here—to be tortured?" Tignonville cried.

Count Hannibal's eyes sparkled. Sudden stormy changes, from indifference to ferocity, from irony to invective, were characteristic of the man. "Tortured!" he repeated grimly. "You talk of torture while Piles and Pardaillan, Teligny and Rochefoucauld lie dead in the street! While your cause sinks withered in a night, like a gourd! While your servants fall butchered, and France rises round you in a tide of blood! Bah!"—with a gesture of disdain—"you make me also talk, and I have no love for talk, and small time. Mademoiselle, you at least act and do not talk. By your leave I return in an hour, and I bring with me—shall it be my priest, or your minister?"

She looked at him with the face of one who awakes slowly to the full horror, the full dread, of her position. For a moment she did not answer. Then, "A minister," she murmured, her voice scarcely audible.

He nodded. "A minister?" he said lightly. "Very well, if I can find one." And walking to the shattered, gaping casement—through which the cool morning air blew into the room and gently stirred the hair of the unhappy girl—he said some words to the man on guard outside. Then he turned to the door, but on the threshold he paused, looked with a strange expression at the pair, and signed to Carlat and the servants to go out before him.

"Up, and lie close above!" he growled. "Open a

window or look out, and you will pay dearly for it! Do you hear? Up! Up! You, too, old crop-ears. What! would you?"—with a sudden glare as Carlat hesitated—"that is better! Mademoiselle, until my return."

He saw them all out, followed them, and closed the door on the two; who, left together, alone with the gaping window and the disordered feast, maintained a strange silence. The girl, gripping one hand in the other as if to quell her rising horror, sat looking before her, and seemed barely to breathe. The man, leaning against the wall at a little distance, bent his eyes not on her, but on the floor, his face gloomy and distorted.

His first thought should have been of her and for her; his first impulse to console, if he could not save her. His it should have been to soften, were that possible, the fate before her; to prove to her by words of farewell, the purest and most sacred, that the sacrifice she was making, not to save her own life but the lives of others, was appreciated by him who paid with her the price.

And all these things, and more, may have been in M. de Tignonville's mind; they may even have been uppermost in it, but they found no expression. The man remained sunk in a sombre reverie. He had the appearance of thinking of himself, not of her; of his own position, not of hers. Otherwise he must have looked at her, he must have turned to her; he must have owned the subtle attraction of her unspoken appeal when she drew a deep breath and slowly turned her eyes on him, mute, asking, waiting what he should offer.

Surely he should have! Yet it was long before he

responded. He sat buried in thought of himself, and his position, the vile, the unworthy position in which her act had placed him. At length the constraint of her gaze wrought on him, or his thoughts became unbearable, and he looked up and met her eyes, and with an oath he sprang to his feet.

"It shall not be!" he cried, in a tone low, but full of fury. "You shall not do it! I will kill him first! I will kill him with this hand! Or——" a step took him to the window, a step brought him back—ay, brought him back exultant, and with a changed face. "Or better, we will thwart him yet. See, Mademoiselle, do you see? Heaven is merciful! For a moment the cage is open!" His eyes shone with excitement, the sweat of sudden hope stood on his brow as he pointed to the unguarded casement. "Come! it is our one chance!" And he caught her by her arm, and strove to draw her to the window.

But she hung back, staring at him. "Oh, no, no!" she cried.

"Yes, yes! I say!" he responded. "You do not understand. The way is open! We can escape, Clotilde, we can escape!"

"I cannot! I cannot!" she wailed, still resisting him.

"You are afraid?"

"Afraid?" she repeated the word in a tone of wonder. "No, but I cannot. I promised him. I cannot. And, O God!" she continued, in a sudden outburst of grief, as the sense of general loss, of the great common tragedy broke on her and whelmed for the moment her private misery. "Why should we think of ourselves? They are dead, they are dying, who were ours, whom we loved! Why should we think to live? What does it matter how it fares with

us? We cannot be happy. Happy?" she continued wildly. "Are any happy now? Or is the world all changed in a night? No, we could not be happy. And at least you will live, Tignonville. I have that to console me."

"Live!" he responded vehemently. "I live? I would rather die a thousand times. A thousand times rather than live shamed! Than see you sacrificed to that devil! Than go out with a brand on my brow, for every man to point at me! I would rather die a thousand times!"

"And do you think that I would not?" she answered, shivering. "Better, far better die than—than live with him!"

"Then why not die?"

She stared at him, wide-eyed, and a sudden stillness possessed her. "How?" she whispered. "What do you mean?"

"That!" he said. As he spoke, he raised his hand and signed to her to listen. A sullen murmur, distant as yet, but borne to the ear on the fresh morning air, foretold the rising of another storm. The sound grew in intensity, even while she listened; and yet for a moment she misunderstood him. "O God!" she cried, out of the agony of nerves overwrought, "will that bell never stop? Will it never stop? Will no one stop it?"

"'Tis not the bell!" he cried, seizing her hand as if to focus her attention. "It is the mob you hear. They are returning. We have but to stand a moment at this open window, we have but to show ourselves to them, and we need live no longer! Mademoiselle! Clotilde!—if you mean what you say, if you are in earnest, the way is open!"

"And we shall die—together!"

"Yes, together. But have you the courage?"

"The courage?" she cried, a brave smile lighting the whiteness of her face. "The courage were needed to live. The courage were needed to do that. I am ready, quite ready. It can be no sin! To live with that in front of me were the sin! Come!" For the moment she had forgotten her people, her promise, all! It seemed to her that death would absolve her from all. "Come!"

He moved with her under the impulse of her hand until they stood at the gaping window. The murmur, which he had heard indistinctly a moment before, had grown to a roar of voices. The mob, on its return eastward along the Rue St. Honoré, was nearing the house. He stood, his arm supporting her, and they waited, a little within the window. Suddenly he stooped, his face hardly less white than hers; their eyes met, and he would have kissed her.

She did not withdraw from his arm, but she drew back her face, her eyes half shut. "No!" she murmured. "No! While I live I am his. But we die together, Tignonville! We die together. It will not last long, will it? And afterwards——"

She did not finish the sentence, but her lips moved in prayer, and over her features came a far-away look; such a look as that which on the face of another Huguenot lady, Philippine de Luns—vilely done to death in the Place Maubert fourteen years before—silenced the ribald jests of the lowest rabble in the world. An hour or two earlier, awed by the abruptness of the outburst, Mademoiselle had shrunk from her fate; she had known fear. Now that she stood out voluntarily to meet it, she, like many a wo-

man before and since, feared no longer. She was lifted out of and above herself.

But death was long in coming. Some cause beyond their knowledge stayed the onrush of the mob along the street. The din, indeed, persisted, deafened, shook them; but the crowd seemed to be at a stand a few doors down the Rue St. Honoré. For a half-minute, a long half-minute, which appeared an age, it drew no nearer. Would it draw nearer? Would it come on? Or would it turn again?

The doubt, so much worse than despair, began to sap that courage of the man which is always better fitted to do than to suffer. The sweat rose on Tignonville's brow as he stood listening, his arm round the girl—as he stood listening and waiting. It is possible that when he had said a minute or two earlier that he would rather die a thousand times than live thus shamed, he had spoken beyond the mark. Or it is possible that he had meant his words to the full. But in this case he had not pictured what was to come, he had not gauged correctly his power of passive endurance. He was as brave as the ordinary man, as the ordinary soldier; but martyrdom, the apotheosis of resignation, comes more naturally to women than to men, more hardly to men than to women. Yet had the crisis come quickly he might have met it. But he had to wait, and to wait with that howling of wild beasts in his ears; and for this he was not prepared. A woman might be content to die after this fashion; but a man? His colour went and came, his eyes began to rove hither and thither. Was it even now too late to escape? Too late to avoid the consequences of the girl's silly persistence? Too late to——? Her eyes were closed, she hung half lifeless

on his arm. She would not know, she need not know until afterwards. And afterwards she would thank him! Afterwards—meantime the window was open, the street was empty, and still the crowd hung back and did not come.

He remembered that two doors away was a narrow passage, which leaving the Rue St. Honoré turned at right angles under a beetling archway, to emerge in the Rue du Roule. If he could gain that passage unseen by the mob! He would gain it. With a swift movement, his mind made up, he took a step forward. He tightened his grasp of the girl's waist, and, seizing with his left hand the end of the bar which the assailants had torn from its setting in the window jamb, he turned to lower himself. One long step would land him in the street.

At that moment she awoke from the stupor of exaltation. She opened her eyes with a startled movement; and her eyes met his.

He was in the act of stepping backwards and downwards, dragging her after him. But it was not this betrayed him. It was his face, which in an instant told her all, and that he sought not death, but life! She struggled upright and strove to free herself. But he had the purchase of the bar, and by this time he was furious as well as determined. Whether she would or no, he would save her, he would drag her out. Then, as consciousness fully returned, she, too, took fire. "No!" she cried, "I will not!" and she struggled more violently.

"You shall!" he retorted between his teeth. "You shall not perish here."

But she had her hands free, and as he spoke she thrust him from her passionately, desperately, with

all her strength. He had his one foot in the air at the moment, and in a flash it was done. With a cry of rage he lost his balance, and, still holding the bar, reeled backwards through the window; while Mademoiselle, panting and half fainting, recoiled—recoiled into the arms of Hannibal de Tavannes, who, unseen by either, had entered the room a long minute before. From the threshold, and with a smile, all his own, he had watched the contest and the result.

CHAPTER VIII.

TWO HENS AND AN EGG.

M. DE TIGNONVILLE was shaken by the fall, and in the usual course of things he would have lain where he was, and groaned. But when a man has once turned his back on death he is apt to fancy it at his shoulder. He has small stomach for surprises, and is in haste to set as great a distance as possible between the ugly thing and himself. So it was with the Huguenot. Shot suddenly into the full publicity of the street, he knew that at any instant danger might take him by the nape; and he was on his legs and glancing up and down before the clatter of his fall had travelled the length of three houses.

The rabble were still a hundred paces away, piled up and pressed about a house where men were being hunted as men hunt rats. He saw that he was unnoted, and apprehension gave place to rage. His thoughts turned back hissing hot to the thing that had happened, and in a paroxysm of shame he shook his fist at the gaping casement and the sneering face of his rival, dimly seen in the background. If a look would have killed Tavannes—and her—it had not been wanting.

For it was not only the man M. de Tignonville hated at this moment; he hated Mademoiselle also, the unwitting agent of the other's triumph. She had thrust him from her; she had refused to be guided

by him; she had resisted, thwarted, shamed him. Then let her take the consequences. She willed to perish: let her perish!

He did not acknowledge even to himself the real cause of offence, the proof to which she had put his courage, and the failure of that courage to stand the test. Yet it was this, though he had himself provoked the trial, which burned up his chivalry, as the smuggler's fire burns up the dwarf heath upon the Landes. It was the discovery that in an heroic hour he was no hero that gave force to his passionate gesture, and next moment sent him storming down the beetling passage to the Rue du Roule, his heart a maelstrom of fierce vows and fiercer menaces.

He had reached the further end of the alley and was on the point of entering the street before he remembered that he had nowhere to go. His lodgings were no longer his, since his landlord knew him to be a Huguenot, and would doubtless betray him. To approach those of his faith whom he had frequented was to expose them to danger; and, beyond the religion, he had few acquaintances and those of the newest. Yet the streets were impossible. He walked them on the utmost edge of peril; he lurked in them under the blade of an impending axe. And, whether he walked or lurked, he went at the mercy of the first comers bold enough to take his life.

The sweat stood on his brow as he paused under the low arch of the alley-end, tasting the bitter forlornness of the dog banned and set for death in that sunlit city. In every window of the gable end which faced his hiding-place he fancied an eye watching his movements; in every distant step he

heard the footfall of doom coming that way to his discovery. And while he trembled, he had to reflect, to think, to form some plan.

In the town was no place for him, and short of the open country no safety. And how could he gain the open country? If he succeeded in reaching one of the gates—St. Antoine, or St. Denis, in itself a task of difficulty—it would only be to find the gate closed, and the guard on the alert. At last it flashed on him that he might cross the river; and at the notion hope awoke. It was possible that the massacre had not extended to the southern suburb; possible, that if it had, the Huguenots who lay there—Frontenay, and Montgomery, and Chartres, with the men of the North—might be strong enough to check it, and even to turn the tables on the Parisians.

His colour returned. He was no coward, as soldiers go; if it came to fighting he had courage enough. He could not hope to cross the river by the bridge, for there, where the goldsmiths lived, the mob were like to be most busy. But if he could reach the bank he might procure a boat at some deserted point, or, at the worst, he might swim across.

From the Louvre at his back came the sound of gun-shots; from every quarter the murmur of distant crowds, or the faint lamentable cries of victims. But the empty street before him promised an easy passage, and he ventured into it and passed quickly through it. He met no one, and no one molested him; but as he went he had glimpses of pale faces that from behind the casements watched him come and turned to watch him go; and so heavy on his nerves was the pressure of this silent ominous at-

tention, that he blundered at the end of the street. He should have taken the southerly turning; instead he held on, found himself in the Rue Ferronerie, and a moment later was all but in the arms of a band of city guards, who were making a house-to-house visitation.

He owed his safety rather to the condition of the street than to his presence of mind. The Rue Ferronerie, narrow in itself, was so choked at this date by stalls and bulkheads, that an edict directing the removal of those which abutted on the cemetery had been issued a little before. Nothing had been done on it, however, and this neck of Paris, this main thoroughfare between the east and the west, between the fashionable quarter of the Marais and the fashionable quarter of the Louvre, was still a devious huddle of sheds and pent-houses. Tignonville slid behind one of these, found that it masked the mouth of an alley, and, heedless whither the passage led, ran hurriedly along it. Every instant he expected to hear the hue and cry behind him, and he did not halt or draw breath until he had left the soldiers far in the rear, and found himself astray at the junction of four noisome lanes, over two of which the projecting gables fairly met. Above the two others a scrap of sky appeared, but this was too small to indicate in which direction the river lay.

Tignonville hesitated, but not for long; a burst of voices heralded a new danger, and he shrank into a doorway. Along one of the lanes a troop of children, the biggest not twelve years old, came dancing and leaping round something which they dragged by a string. Now one of the hindmost would hurl it onward with a kick, now another, amid screams of

childish laughter, tripped headlong over the cord; now at the crossways they stopped to wrangle and question which way they should go, or whose turn it was to pull and whose to follow. At last they started afresh with a whoop, the leader singing and all plucking the string to the cadence of the air. Their plaything leapt and dropped, sprang forward, and lingered like a thing of life. But it was no thing of life, as Tignonville saw with a shudder when they passed him. The object of their sport was the naked body of a child, an infant!

His gorge rose at the sight. Fear such as he had not before experienced chilled his marrow. This was hate indeed, a hate before which the strong man quailed; the hate of which Mademoiselle had spoken when she said that the babes crossed themselves at her passing, and the houses tottered to fall upon her!

He paused a minute to recover himself, so deeply had the sight moved him; and as he stood, he wondered if that hate already had its cold eye fixed on him. Instinctively his gaze searched the opposite wall, but save for two small double-grated windows it was blind; time-stained and stone-built, dark with the ordure of the city lane, it seemed but the back of a house, which looked another way. The outer gates of an arched doorway were open, and a loaded hay-cart, touching either side and brushing the arch above, blocked the passage. His gaze, leaving the windows, dropped to this, he scanned it a moment; and on a sudden he stiffened. Between the hay and the arch a hand flickered an instant, then vanished.

Tignonville stared. At first he thought his eyes had tricked him. Then the hand appeared again,

and this time it conveyed an unmistakable invitation. It is not from the unknown or the hidden that the fugitive has aught to fear, and Tignonville, after casting a glance down the lane—which revealed a single man standing with his face the other way—slipped across and pushed between the hay and the wall. He coughed.

A voice whispered to him to climb up; a friendly hand clutched him in the act, and aided him. In a second he was lying on his face, tight squeezed between the hay and the roof of the arch. Beside him lay a man whose features his eyes, unaccustomed to the gloom, could not discern. But the man knew him and whispered his name.

"You know me?" Tignonville muttered in astonishment.

"I marked you, M. de Tignonville, at the preaching last Sunday," the stranger answered placidly.

"You were there?"

"I preached."

"Then you are M. la Tribe!"

"I am," the clergyman answered quietly. "They seized me on my threshold, but I left my cloak in their hands and fled. One tore my stocking with his point, another my doublet, but not a hair of my head was injured. They hunted me to the end of the next street, but I lived and still live, and shall live to lift up my voice against this wicked city."

The sympathy between the Huguenot by faith and the Huguenot by politics was imperfect. Tignonville, like most men of rank of the younger generation, was a Huguenot by politics; and he was in a bitter humour. He felt, perhaps, that it was men such as this who had driven the other side to excesses

such as these; and he hardly repressed a sneer. "I wish I felt as sure!" he muttered bluntly. "You know that all our people are dead?"

"He can save by few or by many," the preacher answered devoutly. "We are of the few, blessed be God, and shall see Israel victorious, and our people as a flock of sheep!"

"I see small chance of it," Tignonville answered contemptuously.

"I know it as certainly as I knew before you came, M. de Tignonville, that you would come!"

"That I should come?"

"That some one would come," La Tribe answered, correcting himself. "I knew not who it would be until you appeared and placed yourself in the doorway over against me, even as Obadiah in the Holy Book passed before the hiding-place of Elijah."

The two lay on their faces side by side, the rafters of the archway low on their heads. Tignonville lifted himself a little, and peered anew at the other. He fancied that La Tribe's mind, shaken by the horrors of the morning and his narrow escape, had given way. "You rave, man," he said. "This is no time for visions."

"I said naught of visions," the other answered.

"Then why so sure that we shall escape?"

"I am certified of it," La Tribe replied. "And more than that, I know that we shall lie here some days. The time has not been revealed to me, but it will be days and a day. Then we shall leave this place unharmed, as we entered it, and, whatever betide others, we shall live."

Tignonville shrugged his shoulders. "I tell you, you rave, M. la Tribe," he said petulantly. "At any

moment we may be discovered. Even now I hear footsteps."

"They tracked me well-nigh to this place," the minister answered placidly.

"The deuce they did!" Tignonville muttered, with irritation. He dared not raise his voice. "I would you had told me that before I joined you, Monsieur, and I had found some safer hiding-place! When we are discovered——"

"Then," the other continued calmly, "you will see."

"In any case we shall be better farther back," Tignonville retorted. "Here, we are within an ace of being seen from the lane." And he began to wriggle himself backwards.

The minister laid his hand on him. "Have a care!" he muttered. "And do not move, but listen. And you will understand. When I reached this place—it would be about five o'clock this morning—breathless, and expecting each minute to be dragged forth to make my confession before men, I despaired as you despair now. Like Elijah under the juniper tree, I said 'It is enough, O Lord! Take my soul also, for I am no better than my fellows!' All the sky was black before my eyes, and my ears were filled with the wailings of the little ones and the lamentations of women. 'O Lord, it is enough,' I prayed. 'Take my soul, or, if it be Thy will, then, as the angel was sent to take the cakes to Elijah, give me also a sign that I shall live.'"

For a moment he paused, struggling with overpowering emotion. Even his impatient listener, hitherto incredulous, caught the infection, and in a tone of awe murmured, "Yes? And then, M. la Tribe!"

"The sign was given me. The words were scarcely

out of my mouth when a hen flew up, and, scratching a nest in the hay at my feet, presently laid an egg."

Tignonville stared. "It was timely, I admit," he said. "But it is no uncommon thing. Probably it has its nest here and lays daily."

"Young man, this is new-mown hay," the minister answered solemnly. "This cart was brought here no further back than yesterday. It smells of the meadow, and the flowers hold their colour. No, the fowl was sent. To-morrow it will return, and the next, and the next, until the plague be stayed and I go hence. But that is not all. A while later a second hen appeared, and I thought it would lay in the same nest. But it made a new one, on the side on which you lie and not far from your foot. Then I knew that I was to have a companion, and that God had laid also for him a table in the wilderness."

"It did lay, then?"

"It is still on the nest, beside your foot."

Tignonville was about to reply when the preacher grasped his arm and by a sign enjoined silence. He did so not a moment too soon. Preoccupied by the story, narrator and listener had paid no heed to what was passing in the lane, and the voices of men speaking close at hand took them by surprise. From the first words which reached them, it was clear that the speakers were the same who had chased La Tribe as far as the meeting of the four ways, and, losing him there, had spent the morning in other business. Now they had returned to hunt him down, and but for a wrangle which arose among them and detained them, they had stolen on their quarry before their coming was suspected.

"'Twas this way he ran!" "No, 'twas the other!"

they contended; and their words, winged with vile threats and oaths, grew noisy and hot. The two listeners dared scarcely to breathe. The danger was so near, it was so certain that if the men came three paces farther, they would observe and search the hay-cart, that Tignonville fancied the steel already at his throat. He felt the hay rustle under his slightest movement, and gripped one hand with the other to restrain the tremor of overpowering excitement. Yet when he glanced at the minister he found him unmoved, a smile on his face. And M. de Tignonville could have cursed him for his folly.

For the men were coming on! An instant, and they perceived the cart, and the ruffian who had advised this route pounced on it in triumph. "There! Did I not say so?" he cried. "He is curled up in that hay, for the Satan's grub he is! That is where he is, see you!"

"Maybe," another answered grudgingly, as they gathered before it. "And maybe not, Simon!"

"To hell with your maybe not!" the first replied. And he drove his pike deep into the hay and turned it viciously.

The two on the top controlled themselves. Tignonville's face was livid; of himself he would have slid down amongst them and taken his chance, preferring to die fighting, to die in the open, rather than to perish like a rat in a stack. But La Tribe had gripped his arm and held him fast.

The man whom the others called Simon thrust again, but too low and without result. He was for trying a third time, when one of his comrades who had gone to the other side of the lane announced that the men were on the top of the hay.

"Can you see them?"

"No, but there's room and to spare."

"Oh, a curse on your room!" Simon retorted.

"Well, you can look."

"If that's all, I'll soon look!" was the answer. And the rogue, forcing himself between the hay and the side of the gateway, found the wheel of the cart, and began to raise himself on it. Tignonville, who lay on that hand, heard, though he could not see his movements. He knew what they meant, he knew that in a twinkling he must be discovered; and with a last prayer he gathered himself for a spring.

It seemed an age before the intruder's head appeared on a level with the hay; and then the alarm came from another quarter. The hen which had made its nest at Tignonville's feet, disturbed by the movement or by the newcomer's hand, flew out with a rush and flutter as of a great firework. Upsetting the startled Simon, who slipped swearing to the ground, it swooped scolding and clucking over the heads of the other men, and reaching the street in safety scuttled off at speed, its outspread wings sweeping the earth in its rage.

They laughed uproariously as Simon emerged, rubbing his elbow. "There's for you! There's your preacher!" his opponent jeered.

"D——n her! she gives tongue as fast as any of them!" gibed a second. "Will you try again, Simon? You may find another love-letter there!"

"Have done!" a third cried impatiently. "He'll not be where the hen is! Let's back! Let's back! I said before that it wasn't this way he turned! He's made for the river."

"The plague in his vitals!" Simon replied furi-

ously. "Wherever he is, I'll find him!" And reluctant to confess himself wrong, he lingered, casting vengeful glances at the hay. But one of the other men cursed him for a fool; and presently, forced to accept his defeat or be left alone, he rejoined his fellows. Slowly the footsteps and voices receded along the lane; slowly, until silence swallowed them, and on the quivering strained senses of the two who remained behind, descended the gentle influence of twilight and the sweet scent of the new-mown hay on which they lay.

La Tribe turned to his companion, his eyes shining. "Our soul is escaped," he murmured, "even as a bird out of the snare of the fowler. The snare is broken and we are delivered!" His voice shook as he whispered the ancient words of triumph.

But when they came to look in the nest at Tignonville's feet there was no egg!

CHAPTER IX.

UNSTABLE.

And that troubled M. la Tribe no little, although he did not impart his thoughts to his companion. Instead they talked in whispers of the things which had happened; of the Admiral, of Teligny, whom all loved, of Rochefoucauld the accomplished, the King's friend; of the princes in the Louvre whom they gave up for lost, and of the Huguenot nobles on the farther side of the river, of whose safety there seemed some hope. Tignonville—he best knew why—said nothing of the fate of his betrothed, or of his own adventures in that connection. But each told the other how the alarm had reached him, and painted in broken words his reluctance to believe in treachery so black. Thence they passed to the future of the cause, and of that took views as opposite as light and darkness, as Papegot and Huguenot. The one was confident, the other in despair. And some time in the afternoon, worn out by the awful experiences of the last twelve hours, they fell asleep, their heads on their arms, the hay tickling their faces; and, with death stalking the lane beside them, slept soundly until after sundown.

When they awoke hunger awoke with them, and urged on La Tribe's mind the question of the missing egg. It was not altogether the prick of appetite which troubled him, but regarding the hiding-place in

which they lay as an ark of refuge providentially supplied, protected and victualled, he could not refrain from asking reverently what the deficiency meant. It was not as if one hen only had appeared; as if no farther prospect had been extended. But up to a certain point the message was clear. Then when the Hand of Providence had shown itself most plainly, and in a manner to melt the heart with awe and thankfulness, the message had been blurred. Seriously the Huguenot asked himself what it portended.

To Tignonville, if he thought of it at all, the matter was the matter of an egg, and stopped there. An egg might alleviate the growing pangs of hunger; its non-appearance was a disappointment, but he traced the matter no farther. It must be confessed that the hay-cart was to him only a hay-cart—and not an ark; and the sooner he was safely away from it the better he would be pleased. While La Tribe, lying snug and warm beside him, thanked God for a lot so different from that of such of his fellows as had escaped —whom he pictured crouching in dank cellars, or on roof-trees exposed to the heat by day and the dews by night—the young man grew more and more restive.

Hunger pricked him, and the meanness of the part he had played moved him to action. About midnight, resisting the dissuasions of his companion, he would have sallied out in search of food if the passage of a turbulent crowd had not warned him that the work of murder was still proceeding. He curbed himself after that and lay until daylight. But, ill content with his own conduct, on fire when he thought of his betrothed, he was in no temper to bear hard-

ship cheerfully or long; and gradually there rose before his mind the picture of Madame St. Lo's smiling face, and the fair hair which curled low on the white of her neck.

He would, and he would not. Death that had stalked so near him preached its solemn sermon. But death and pleasure are never far apart; and at no time and nowhere have they jostled one another more familiarly than in that age, wherever the influence of Italy and Italian art and Italian hopelessness extended. Again, on the one side, La Tribe's example went for something with his comrade in misfortune; but in the other scale hung relief from discomfort, with the prospect of a woman's smiles and a woman's flatteries, of dainty dishes, luxury, and passion. If he went now, he went to her from the jaws of death, with the glamour of adventure and peril about him; and the very going into her presence was a lure. Moreover, if he had been willing while his betrothed was still his, why not now when he had lost her?

It was this last reflection—and one other thing which came on a sudden into his mind—which turned the scale. About noon he sat up in the hay, and, abruptly and sullenly, "I'll lie here no longer," he said; and he dropped his legs over the side. "I shall go."

The movement was so unexpected that La Tribe stared at him in silence. Then, "You will run a great risk, M. de Tignonville," he said gravely, "if you do. You may go as far under cover of night as the river, or you may reach one of the gates. But as to crossing the one or passing the other, I reckon it a thing impossible."

"I shall not wait until night," Tignonville answered

curtly, a ring of defiance in his tone. "I shall go now! I'll lie here no longer!"

"Now?"

"Yes, now."

"You will be mad if you do," the other replied. He thought it the petulant outcry of youth tired of inaction; a protest, and nothing more.

He was speedily undeceived. "Mad or not, I am going!" Tignonville retorted. And he slid to the ground, and from the covert of the hanging fringe of hay looked warily up and down the lane. "It is clear, I think," he said. "Good-bye." And with no more, without one upward glance or a gesture of the hand, with no further adieu or word of gratitude, he walked out into the lane, turned briskly to the left, and vanished.

The minister uttered a cry of astonishment, and made as if he would descend also. "Come back, sir!" he called, as loudly as he dared. "M. de Tignonville, come back! This is folly or worse!"

But M. de Tignonville was gone.

La Tribe listened a while, unable to believe it, and still expecting his return. At last, hearing nothing, he slid, greatly excited, to the ground and looked out. It was not until he had peered up and down the lane and made sure that it was empty that he could persuade himself that the other had gone for good. Then he climbed slowly and seriously to his place again, and sighed as he settled himself. "Unstable as water thou shalt not excel!" he muttered. "Now I know why there was only one egg."

Meanwhile Tignonville, after putting a hundred yards between himself and his bedfellow, plunged into the first dark entry which presented itself. Hur-

riedly, and with a frowning face, he cut off his left sleeve from shoulder to wrist; and this act, by disclosing his linen, put him in possession of the white sleeve which he had once involuntarily donned, and once discarded. The white cross on the cap he could not assume, for he was bareheaded. But he had little doubt that the sleeve would suffice, and with a bold demeanour he made his way northward until he reached again the Rue Ferronerie.

Excited groups were wandering up and down the street, and, fearing to traverse its crowded narrows, he went by lanes parallel with it as far as the Rue St. Denis, which he crossed. Everywhere he saw houses gutted and doors burst in, and traces of a cruelty and a fanaticism almost incredible. Near the Rue des Lombards he saw a dead child, stripped stark and hanged on the hook of a cobbler's shutter. A little further on in the same street he stepped over the body of a handsome young woman, distinguished by the length and beauty of her hair. To obtain her bracelets, her captors had cut off her hands; afterwards—but God knows how long afterwards—a passer-by, more pitiful than his fellows, had put her out of her misery with a spit, which still remained plunged in her body.

M. de Tignonville shuddered at the sight, and at others like it. He loathed the symbol he wore, and himself for wearing it; and more than once his better nature bade him return and play the nobler part. Once he did turn with that intention. But he had set his mind on comfort and pleasure, and the value of these things is raised, not lowered, by danger and uncertainty. Quickly his stoicism oozed away; he turned again. Barely avoiding the rush of a crowd

of wretches who were bearing a swooning victim to the river, he hurried through the Rue des Lombards and reached in safety the house beside the "Golden Maid."

He had no doubt now on which side of the "Maid" Madame St. Lo lived; the house was plain before him. He had only to knock. But in proportion as he approached his haven, his anxiety grew. To lose all, with all in his grasp, to fail upon the threshold, was a thing which bore no looking at; and it was with a nervous hand and eyes cast fearfully behind him that he plied the heavy iron knocker which adorned the door.

He could not turn his gaze from a knot of ruffians, who were gathered under one of the tottering gables on the farther side of the street. They seemed to be watching him, and he fancied—though the distance rendered this impossible—that he could see suspicion growing in their eyes. At any moment they might cross the roadway, they might approach, they might challenge him. And at the thought he knocked and knocked again. Why did not the porter come?

Ay, why? For now a score of contingencies came into the young man's mind and tortured him. Had Madame St. Lo withdrawn to safer quarters and closed the house? Or, good Catholic as she was, had she given way to panic, and determined to open to no one? Or was she ill? Or had she perished in the general disorder? Or——

And then, even as the men began to slink towards him, his heart leapt. He heard a footstep heavy and slow move through the house. It came nearer and nearer. A moment, and an iron-grated Judas-hole in the door slid open, and a servant, an elderly man, sleek and respectable, looked out at him.

Tignonville could scarcely speak for excitement. "Madame St. Lo?" he muttered tremulously. "I come to her from her cousin the Comte de Tavannes. Quick! quick! if you please. Open to me!"

"Monsieur is alone?"

"Yes! Yes!"

The man nodded gravely and slid back the bolts. He allowed M. de Tignonville to enter, then with care he secured the door, and led the way across a small square court, paved with red tiles and enclosed by the house, but open above to the sunshine and the blue sky. A gallery which ran round the upper floor looked on this court, in which a great quiet reigned, broken only by the music of a fountain. A vine climbed on the wooden pillars which supported the gallery, and, aspiring higher, embraced the wide carved eaves, and even tapestried with green the three gables that on each side of the court broke the sky-line. The grapes hung nearly ripe, and amid their clusters and the green lattice of their foliage Tignonville's gaze sought eagerly but in vain the laughing eyes and piquant face of his new mistress. For with the closing of the door, and the passing from him of the horrors of the streets, he had entered, as by magic, a new and smiling world; a world of tennis and roses, of tinkling voices and women's wiles, a world which smacked of Florence and the South, and love and life; a world which his late experiences had set so far away from him, his memory of it seemed a dream. Now, as he drank in its stillness and its fragrance, as he felt its safety and its luxury lap him round once more, he sighed. And with that breath he rid himself of much.

The servant led him to a parlour, a cool shady room

on the farther side of the tiny quadrangle, and, muttering something inaudible, withdrew. A moment later a frolicsome laugh, and the light flutter of a woman's skirt as she tripped across the court, brought the blood to his cheeks. He went a step nearer to the door, and his eyes grew bright.

CHAPTER X.

MADAME ST. LO.

So far excitement had supported Tignonville in his escape. It was only when he knew himself safe, when he heard Madame St. Lo's footstep in the courtyard and knew that in a moment he would see her, that he knew also that he was failing for want of food. The room seemed to go round with him; the window to shift, the light to flicker. And then again, with equal abruptness, he grew strong and steady and perfectly master of himself. Nay, never had he felt a confidence in himself so overwhelming or a capacity so complete. The triumph of that which he had done, the knowledge that of so many he, almost alone, had escaped, filled his brain with a delicious and intoxicating vanity. When the door opened, and Madame St. Lo appeared on the threshold, he advanced holding out his arms. He expected that she would fall into them.

But Madame only backed and curtseyed, a mischievous light in her eyes. "A thousand thanks, Monsieur!" she said, "but you are more ready than I!" And she remained by the door.

"I have come to you through all!" he cried, speaking loudly because of a humming in his ears. "They are lying in the streets! They are dying, are dead, are hunted, are pursued, are perishing! But I have come through all to you!"

She curtseyed anew. "So I see, Monsieur!" she answered. "I am flattered!" But she did not advance, and gradually, light-headed as he was, he began to see that she looked at him with an odd closeness. And he took offence.

"I say, Madame, I have come to you!" he repeated. "And you do not seem pleased!"

She came forward a step and looked at him still more oddly. "Oh, yes," she said. "I am pleased, M. de Tignonville. It is what I intended. But tell me how you have fared. You are not hurt?"

"Not a hair!" he cried boastfully. And he told her in a dozen windy sentences of the adventure of the hay-cart and his narrow escape. He wound up with a foolish meaningless laugh.

"Then you have not eaten for thirty-six hours?" she said. And when he did not answer, "I understand," she continued, nodding and speaking as to a child. And she rang a silver handbell and gave an order. She addressed the servant in her usual tone, but to Tignonville's ear her voice seemed to fall to a whisper. Her figure—she was small and fairy-like—began to sway before him; and then in a moment, as it seemed to him, she was gone, and he was seated at a table, his trembling fingers grasping a cup of wine which the elderly servant who had admitted him was holding to his lips. On the table before him were a spit of partridges and a cake of white bread. When he had swallowed a second mouthful of wine—which cleared his eyes as by magic—the man urged him to eat. And he fell to with an appetite that grew as he ate.

By and by, feeling himself again, he became aware that two of Madame's women were peering at him

through the open doorway. He looked that way and they fled giggling into the court; but in a moment they were back again, and the sound of their tittering drew his eyes anew to the door. It was the custom of the day for ladies of rank to wait on their favourites at table; and he wondered if Madame were with them, and why she did not come and serve him herself.

But for a while longer the savour of the roasted game took up the major part of his thoughts; and when prudence warned him to desist, and he sat back, satisfied after his long fast, he was in no mood to be critical. Perhaps—for somewhere in the house he heard a lute—Madame was entertaining those whom she could not leave? Or deluding some who might betray him if they discovered him?

From that his mind turned back to the streets and the horrors through which he had passed; but for a moment and no more. A shudder, an emotion of prayerful pity, and he recalled his thoughts. In the quiet of the cool room, looking on the sunny, vine-clad court, with the tinkle of the lute and the murmurous sound of women's voices in his ears, it was hard to believe that the things from which he had emerged were real. It was still more unpleasant, and as futile, to dwell on them. A day of reckoning would come, and, if La Tribe were right, the cause would rally, bristling with pikes and snorting with war-horses, and the blood spilled in this wicked city would cry aloud for vengeance. But the hour was not yet. He had lost his mistress, and for that atonement must be exacted. But in the present another mistress awaited him, and as a man could only die once, and might die at any minute, so he could

only live once and in the present. Then *vogue la galère!*

As he roused himself from this brief reverie and fell to wondering how long he was to be left to himself, a rosebud tossed by an unseen hand struck him on the breast and dropped to his knees. To seize it and kiss it gallantly, to spring to his feet and look about him were instinctive movements. But he could see no one; and, in the hope of surprising the giver, he stole to the window. The sound of the lute and the distant tinkle of laughter persisted. The court, save for a page, who lay asleep on a bench in the gallery, was empty. Tignonville scanned the boy suspiciously; a male disguise was often adopted by the court ladies, and if Madame would play a prank on him, this was a thing to be reckoned with. But a boy it seemed to be, and after a while the young man went back to his seat.

Even as he sat down, a second flower struck him more sharply in the face, and this time he darted not to the window but to the door. He opened it quickly and looked out, but again he was too late.

"I shall catch you presently, *ma reine!*" he murmured tenderly, with intent to be heard. And he closed the door. But, wiser this time, he waited with his hand on the latch until he heard the rustling of a skirt, and saw the line of light at the foot of the door darkened by a shadow. That moment he flung the door wide, and, clasping the wearer of the skirt in his arms, kissed her lips before she had time to resist.

Then he fell back as if he had been shot! For the wearer of the skirt, she whom he had kissed, was Madame St. Lo's woman, and behind her stood Madame herself, laughing, laughing, laughing with all

the gay abandonment of her light little heart. "Oh, the gallant gentleman!" she cried, and clapped her hands effusively. "Was ever recovery so rapid? Or triumph so speedy? Suzanne, my child, you surpass Venus. Your charms conquer before they are seen!"

M. de Tignonville had put poor Suzanne from him as if she burned; and hot and embarrassed, cursing his haste, he stood looking awkwardly at them. "Madame," he stammered at last, "you know quite well that I——"

"Seeing is believing!"

"That I thought it was you!"

"Oh, what I have lost!" she replied. And she looked archly at Suzanne, who giggled and tossed her head.

He was growing angry. "But, Madame," he protested, "you know——"

"I know what I know, and I have seen what I have seen!" Madame answered merrily. And she hummed,

"Ce fut le plus grand jour d'esté
Que m'embrassa la belle Suzanne!

"Oh, yes, I know what I know!" she repeated. And she fell again to laughing immoderately; while the pretty piece of mischief beside her hung her head, and, putting a finger in her mouth, mocked him with an affectation of modesty.

The young man glowered at them between rage and embarrassment. This was not the reception, nor this the hero's return to which he had looked forward. And a doubt began to take form in his mind. The mistress he had pictured would not laugh at kisses

given to another; nor forget in a twinkling the straits through which he had come to her, the hell from which he had plucked himself! Possibly the court ladies held love as cheap as this, and lovers but as playthings, butts for their wit, and pegs on which to hang their laughter. But—but he began to doubt, and, perplexed and irritated, he showed his feelings.

"Madame," he said stiffly, "a jest is an excellent thing. But pardon me if I say that it is ill played on a fasting man."

Madame desisted from laughter that she might speak. "A fasting man?" she cried. "And he has eaten two partridges!"

"Fasting from love, Madame."

Madame St. Lo held up her hands. "And it's not two minutes since he took a kiss!"

He winced, was silent a moment, and then seeing that he got nothing by the tone he had adopted he cried for quarter. "A little mercy, Madame, as you are beautiful," he said, wooing her with his eyes. "Do not plague me beyond what a man can bear. Dismiss, I pray you, this good creature—whose charms do but set off yours as the star leads the eye to the moon—and make me the happiest man in the world by so much of your company as you will vouchsafe to give me."

"That may be but a very little," she answered, letting her eyes fall coyly, and affecting to handle the tucker of her low ruff. But he saw that her lip twitched; and he could have sworn that she mocked him to Suzanne, for the girl giggled.

Still by an effort he controlled his feelings. "Why so cruel?" he murmured, in a tone meant for her alone, and with a look to match. "You were not so

hard when I spoke with you in the gallery, two evenings ago, Madame."

"Was I not?" she asked. "Did I look like this? And this?" And, languishing, she looked at him very sweetly after two fashions.

"Something."

"Oh, then I meant nothing!" she retorted with sudden vivacity. And she made a face at him, laughing under his nose. "I do that when I mean nothing, Monsieur! Do you see? But you are Gascon, and given, I fear, to flatter yourself."

Then he saw clearly that she played with him: and resentment, chagrin, pique got the better of his courtesy. "I flatter myself?" he cried, his voice choked with rage. "It may be I do now, Madame, but did I flatter myself when you wrote me this note?" And he drew it out and flourished it in her face. "Did I imagine when I read this? Or is it not in your hand? It is a forgery, perhaps," he continued bitterly. "Or it means nothing? Nothing, this note bidding me be at Madame St. Lo's at an hour before midnight —it means nothing? At an hour before midnight, Madame!"

"On Saturday night? The night before last night?"

"On Saturday night, the night before last night! But Madame knows nothing of it? Nothing, I suppose?"

She shrugged her shoulders and smiled cheerfully on him. "Oh, yes, I wrote it," she said. "But what of that, M. de Tignonville?"

"What of that?"

"Yes, Monsieur, what of that? Did you think it was written out of love for you?"

He was staggered for the moment by her coolness. "Out of what, then?" he cried hoarsely. "Out of what, then, if not out of love?"

"Why, out of pity, my little gentleman!" she answered sharply. "And trouble thrown away it seems. Love!" And she laughed so merrily and spontaneously it cut him to the heart. "No; but you said a dainty thing or two, and smiled a smile; and like a fool, and like a woman, I was sorry for the innocent calf that bleated so prettily on its way to the butcher's! And I would lock you up and save your life, I thought, until the blood-letting was over. Now you have it, M. de Tignonville, and I hope you like it."

Like it, when every word she uttered stripped him of the selfish illusions in which he had wrapped himself against the blasts of ill-fortune? Like it, when the prospect of her charms had bribed him from the path of fortitude, when for her sake he had been false to his mistress, to his friends, to his faith, to his cause? Like it, when he knew as he listened that all was lost, and nothing gained—not even this poor, unworthy, shameful compensation? Like it? No wonder that words failed him, and he glared at her in rage, in misery, in shame.

"Oh, if you don't like it," she continued, tossing her head after a momentary pause, "then you should not have come! It is of no profit to glower at me, Monsieur. You do not frighten me."

"I would—I would to God I had not come!" he groaned.

"And, I dare say, that you had never seen me—since you cannot win me!"

"That too," he exclaimed.

She was of an extraordinary levity, and at that after staring at him a moment she broke into shrill laughter. "A little more, and I'll send you to my cousin Hannibal!" she said. "You do not know how anxious he is to see you. Have you a mind," with a waggish look, "to play bride's man, M. de Tignonville? Or will you give away the bride? It is not too late, though soon it will be!"

He winced, and from red grew pale. "What do you mean?" he stammered. And, averting his eyes in shame, seeing now all the littleness, all the baseness of his position, "Has he—married her?" he continued.

"Ho, ho!" she cried in triumph. "I've hit you now, have I, Monsieur? I've hit you!" And mocking him, "Has he—married her?" she lisped. "No; but he will marry her, have no fear of that! He will marry her. He waits but to get a priest. Would you like to see what he says?" she continued, playing with him as a cat plays with a mouse. "I had a note from him yesterday. Would you like to see how welcome you'll be at the wedding?" And she flaunted a piece of paper before his eyes.

"Give it me," he said.

She let him seize it the while she shrugged her shoulders. "It's your affair, not mine," she said. "See it if you like, and keep it if you like. Cousin Hannibal wastes few words."

That was true, for the paper contained but a dozen or fifteen words, and an initial by way of signature. "I may need your shaveling to-morrow afternoon. Send him, and Tignonville in safeguard if he come.—H."

"I can guess what use he has for a priest," she

said. "It is not to confess him, I warrant. It's long, I fear, since Hannibal told his beads."

M. de Tignonville swore. "I would I had the confessing of him!" he said between his teeth.

She clapped her hands in glee. "Why should you not?" she cried. "Why should you not? 'Tis time yet, since I am to send to-day and have not sent. Will you be the shaveling to go confess or marry him?" And she laughed recklessly. "Will you, M. de Tignonville? The cowl will mask you as well as another, and pass you through the streets better than a cut sleeve. He will have both his wishes, lover and clerk in one then. And it will be pull monk, pull Hannibal with a vengeance."

Tignonville gazed at her, and as he gazed courage and hope awoke in his eyes. What if, after all, he could undo the past? What if, after all, he could retrace the false step he had taken, and place himself again where he had been—by *her* side? "If you meant it!" he exclaimed, his breath coming fast. "If you only meant what you say, Madame."

"If?" she answered, opening her eyes. "And why should I not mean it?"

"Because," he replied slowly, "cowl or no cowl, when I meet your cousin——"

"'Twill go hard with him?" she cried, with a mocking laugh. "And you think I fear for him. That is it, is it?"

He nodded.

"I fear just *so much* for him!" she retorted with contempt. "Just so much!" And coming a step nearer to Tignonville she snapped her small white fingers under his nose. "Do you see? No, M. de Tignonville," she continued, "you do not know Count

Hannibal if you think that he fears, or that any fear for him. If you will beard the lion in his den, the risk will be yours, not his!"

The young man's face glowed. "I take the risk!" he cried. "And I thank you for the chance; that, Madame, whatever betide. But——"

"But what?" she asked, seeing that he hesitated and that his face fell.

"If he afterwards learn that you have played him a trick," he said, "will he not punish you?"

"Punish me?"

He nodded.

Madame laughed her high disdain. "You do not yet know Hannibal de Tavannes," she said. "He does not war with women."

CHAPTER XI.

A BARGAIN.

It is the wont of the sex to snatch at an ell where an inch is offered, and to press an advantage in circumstances in which a man, acknowledging the claims of generosity, scruples to ask for more. The habit, now ingrained, may have sprung from long dependence on the male, and is one which a hundred instances, from the time of Judith downward, prove to be at its strongest where the need is greatest.

When Mademoiselle de Vrillac came out of the hour-long swoon into which her lover's defection had cast her, the expectation of the worst was so strong upon her that she could not at once credit the respite which Madame Carlat hastened to announce. She could not believe that she still lay safe, in her own room above stairs; that she was in the care of her own servants, and that the chamber held no presence more hateful than that of the good woman who sat weeping beside her.

As was to be expected, she came to herself sighing and shuddering, trembling with nervous exhaustion. She looked for *him*, as soon as she looked for any; and even when she had seen the door locked and double-locked, she doubted—doubted, and shook and hid herself in the hangings of the bed. The noise of the riot and rapine which prevailed in the city, and which reached the ear even in that locked room—

and although the window, of paper, with an upper pane of glass, looked into a courtyard—was enough to drive the blood from a woman's cheeks. But it was fear of the house, not of the street, fear from within, not from without, which impelled the girl into the darkest corner and shook her wits. She could not believe that even this short respite was hers, until she had repeatedly heard the fact confirmed at Madame Carlat's mouth.

"You are deceiving me!" she cried more than once. And each time she started up in fresh terror. "He never said that he would not return until to-morrow!"

"He did, my lamb, he did!" the old woman answered with tears. "Would I deceive you?"

"He said he would not return?"

"He said he would not return until to-morrow. You had until to-morrow, he said."

"And then?"

"He would come and bring the priest with him," Madame Carlat replied sorrowfully.

"The priest? To-morrow!" Mademoiselle cried. "The priest!" and she crouched anew with hot eyes behind the hangings of the bed, and, shivering, hid her face.

But this for a time only. As soon as she had made certain of the respite, and that she had until the morrow, her courage rose, and with it the instinct of which mention has been made. Count Hannibal had granted a respite; short as it was, and no more than the barest humanity required, to grant one at all was not the act of the mere butcher who holds the trembling lamb, unresisting, in his hands. It was an act —no more, again be it said, than humanity required

—and yet an act which bespoke an expectation of some return, of some correlative advantage. It was not in the part of the mere brigand. Something had been granted. Something short of the utmost in the captor's power had been exacted. He had shown that there were things he would not do.

Then might not something more be won from him? A further delay, another point; something, no matter what, which could be turned to advantage. With the brigand it is not possible to bargain. But who gives a little may give more; who gives a day may give a week; who gives a week may give a month. And a month? Her heart leapt up. A month seemed a lifetime, an eternity, to her who had but until to-morrow!

Yet there was one consideration which might have daunted a spirit less brave. To obtain aught from Tavannes it was needful to ask him, and to ask him it was needful to see him; and to see him *before* that to-morrow which meant so much to her. It was necessary, in a word, to run some risk; but without risk the card could not be played, and she did not hesitate. It might turn out that she was wrong, that the man was not only pitiless and without bowels of mercy, but lacked also the shred of decency for which she gave him credit, and on which she counted. In that case, if she sent for him—but she would not consider that case.

The position of the window, while it increased the women's safety, debarred them from all knowledge of what was going forward, except that which their ears afforded them. They had no means of judging whether Tavannes remained in the house or had sallied forth to play his part in the work of murder.

Madame Carlat, indeed, had no desire to know anything. In that room above stairs, with the door double-locked, lay a hope of safety in the present, and of ultimate deliverance; there she had a respite from terror, as long as she kept the world outside. To her, therefore, the notion of sending for Tavannes, or communicating with him, came as a thunderbolt. Was her mistress mad? Did she wish to court her fate? To reach Tavannes they must apply to his riders, for Carlat and the men-servants were confined above. Those riders were grim, brutal men, who might resort to rudeness on their own account. And Madame, clinging in a paroxysm of terror to her mistress, suggested all manner of horrors, one on top of the other, until she increased her own terror tenfold. And yet, to do her justice, nothing that even her frenzied imagination suggested exceeded the things which the streets of Paris, fruitful mother of horrors, were witnessing at that very hour. As we now know.

For it was noon—or a little more—of Sunday, August the twenty-fourth, "a holiday, and therefore the people could more conveniently find leisure to kill and plunder." From the bridges, and particularly from the stone bridge of Notre Dame—while they lay safe in that locked room, and Tignonville crouched in his haymow—Huguenots less fortunate were being cast, bound hand and foot, into the Seine. On the river bank Spire Niquet, the bookman, was being burnt over a slow fire, fed with his own books. In their houses, Ramus the scholar and Goujon the sculptor—than whom Paris has neither seen nor deserved a greater—were being butchered like sheep; and in the Valley of Misery, now the Quai de la Megisserie, seven hundred persons who had sought refuge in the

prisons were being beaten to death with bludgeons. Nay, at this hour—a little sooner or a little later, what matters it?—M. Tignonville's own cousin, Madame d'Yverne, the darling of the Louvre the day before, perished in the hands of the mob; and the sister of M. de Taverny, equally ill-fated, died in the same fashion, after being dragged through the streets.

Madame Carlat, then, went not a whit beyond the mark in her argument. But Mademoiselle had made up her mind, and was not to be dissuaded.

"If I am to be Monsieur's wife," she said with quivering nostrils, "shall I fear his servants?"

And opening the door herself, for the others would not, she called. The man who answered was a Norman; and short of stature, and wrinkled and low-browed of feature, with a thatch of hair and a full beard, he seemed the embodiment of the women's apprehensions. Moreover, his *patois* of the cider-land was little better than German to them; their southern, softer tongue was sheer Italian to him. But he seemed not ill-disposed, or Mademoiselle's air overawed him; and presently she made him understand, and with a nod he descended to carry her message.

Then Mademoiselle's heart began to beat; and beat more quickly when she heard *his* step—alas! she knew it already, knew it from all others—on the stairs. The table was set, the card must be played, to win or lose. It might be that with the low opinion he held of women he would think her reconciled to her lot; he would think this an overture, a step towards kinder treatment, one more proof of the inconstancy of the lower and the weaker sex, made to be men's playthings. And at that thought her eyes grew hot with rage. But if it were so, she must still put

up with it. She must still put up with it! She had sent for him, and he was coming—he was at the door!

He entered, and she breathed more freely. For once his face lacked the sneer, the look of smiling possession, which she had come to know and hate. It was grave, expectant, even suspicious; still harsh and dark, akin, as she now observed, to the low-browed, furrowed face of the rider who had summoned him. But the offensive look was gone, and she could breathe.

He closed the door behind him, but he did not advance into the room. "At your pleasure, Mademoiselle?" he said simply. "You sent for me, I think."

She was on her feet, standing before him with something of the submissiveness of Roxana before her conqueror. "I did," she said; and stopped at that, her hand to her side as if she could not continue. But presently in a low voice, "I have heard," she went on, "what you said, Monsieur, after I lost consciousness."

"Yes?" he said; and was silent. Nor did he lose his watchful look.

"I am obliged to you for your thought of me," she continued in a faint voice, "and I shall be still further obliged—I speak to you thus quickly and thus early—if you will grant me a somewhat longer time."

"Do you mean—if I will postpone our marriage?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"It is impossible!"

"Do not say that," she cried, raising her voice impulsively. "I appeal to your generosity. And for a short, a very short, time only."

"It is impossible," he answered quietly. "And

for reasons, Mademoiselle. In the first place I can more easily protect my wife. In the second, I am even now summoned to the Louvre, and should be on my way thither. By to-morrow evening, unless I am mistaken in the business on which I am required, I shall be on my way to a distant province with royal letters. It is essential that our marriage take place before I go."

"Why?" she asked stubbornly.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Why?" he repeated. "Can you ask, Mademoiselle, after the events of last night? Because, if you please, I do not wish to share the fate of M. de Tignonville. Because in these days life is uncertain, and death too certain. Because it was our turn last night, and it may be the turn of your friends—to-morrow night!"

"Then some have escaped?" she cried.

He smiled. "I am glad to find you so shrewd," he replied. "In an honest wife it is an excellent quality. Yes, Mademoiselle; one or two."

"Who? Who? I pray you tell me."

"M. de Montgomery, who slept beyond the river, for one; and the Vidame, and some with him. M. de Biron, whom I count a Huguenot, and who holds the Arsenal in the King's teeth, for another. And a few more. Enough, in a word, Mademoiselle, to keep us wakeful. It is impossible, therefore, for me to postpone the fulfilment of your promise."

"A promise on conditions!" she retorted, in rage that she could win no more. And every line of her splendid figure, every tone of her voice flamed sudden, hot rebellion. "I do not go for nothing! You gave me the lives of all in the house, Monsieur! Of all!" she repeated with passion. "And all are not

here! Before I marry you, you must show me M. de Tignonville alive and safe!"

He shrugged his shoulders. "He has taken himself off," he said. "It is naught to me what happens to him now."

"It is all to me!" she retorted.

At that he glared at her, the veins of his forehead swelling suddenly. But after a seeming struggle with himself he put the insult by, perhaps for future reckoning and account. "I did what I could," he said sullenly. "Had I willed it he had died there and then in the room below. I gave him his life. If he has risked it anew and lost it, it is naught to me."

"It was his life you gave me," she repeated stubbornly. "His life—and the others. But that is not all," she continued; "you promised me a minister."

He nodded, smiling sourly to himself, as if this confirmed a suspicion he had entertained. "Or a priest," he said.

"No, a minister."

"If one could be obtained. . If not, a priest."

"No, it was to be at my will; and I will a minister! I will a minister!" she cried passionately. "Show me M. Tignonville alive, and bring me a minister of my faith, and I will keep my promise, M. de Tavannes. Have no fear of that. But otherwise, I will not."

"You will not?" he cried. "You will not?"

"No!"

"You will not marry me?"

"No!"

The moment she had said it fear seized her, and she could have fled from him, screaming. The flash of his eyes, the sudden passion of his face, burned themselves into her memory. She thought for a second

that he would spring on her and strike her down. Yet though the women behind her held their breath, she faced him, and did not quail; and to that, she fancied, she owed it that he controlled himself. "You will not?" he repeated, as if he could not understand such resistance to his will—as if he could not credit his ears. "You will not?" But after that, when he had said it three times, he laughed; a laugh, however, with a snarl in it that chilled her blood.

"You bargain, do you?" he said. "You will have the last tittle of the price, will you? And have thought of this and that to put me off, and to gain time until your lover, who is all to you, come to save you? Oh, clever girl! clever! But have you thought where you stand—woman? Do you know that if I gave the word to my people they would treat you as the commonest baggage that tramps the Froidmantel? Do you know that it rests with me to save you, or to throw you to the wolves whose ravening you hear?" And he pointed to the window. "Minister? Priest?" he continued. "*Mon Dieu*, Mademoiselle, I stand astonished at my moderation. You chatter to me of ministers and priests, and the one or the other, when it might be neither! When you are as much and as hopelessly in my power to-day as the wench in my kitchen! You! You flout me, and make terms with me! You!"

And he came so near her with his dark harsh face, his tone rose so menacing on the last word, that her nerves, shattered before, gave way, and, unable to control herself, she flinched with a low cry, thinking he would strike her.

He did not follow, nor move to follow; but he laughed a low laugh of content. And his eyes de-

voured her. "Ho! ho!" he said. "We are not so brave as we pretend to be, it seems. And yet you dared to chaffer with me? You thought to thwart me—Tavannes! *Mon Dieu,* Mademoiselle, to what did you trust? To what did you trust? Ay, and to what do you trust?"

She knew that by the movement, which fear had forced from her, she had jeopardised everything. That she stood to lose all and more than all which she had thought to win by a bold front. A woman less brave, of a spirit less firm, would have given up the contest, and have been glad to escape so. But this woman, though her bloodless face showed that she knew what cause she had for fear, and though her heart was, indeed, sick with sheer terror, held her ground at the point to which she had retreated. She played her last card. "To what do I trust?" she muttered with trembling lips.

"Yes, Mademoiselle," he answered, between his teeth. "To what do you trust—that you play with Tavannes?"

"To his honour, Monsieur," she answered faintly. "And to your promise."

He looked at her with his mocking smile. "And yet," he sneered, "you thought a moment ago that I was going to strike you. You thought that I should beat you! And now it is my honour and my promise! Oh, clever, clever, Mademoiselle! 'Tis so that women make fools of men. I knew that something of this kind was on foot when you sent for me, for I know women and their ways. But, let me tell you, it is an ill time to speak of honour when the streets are red! And of promises when the King's word is 'No faith with a heretic!'"

"Yet you will keep yours," she said bravely.

He did not answer at once, and hope which was almost dead in her breast began to recover; nay, presently sprang up erect. For the man hesitated, it was evident; he brooded with a puckered brow and gloomy eyes; an observer might have fancied that he traced pain as well as doubt in his face. At last: "There is a thing," he said slowly and with a sort of glare at her, "which, it may be, you have not reckoned. You press me now, and will stand on your terms and your conditions, your *ifs* and your *unlesses!* You will have the most from me, and the bargain and a little beside the bargain! But I would have you think if you are wise. Bethink you how it will be between us when you are my wife—if you press me so now, Mademoiselle. How will it sweeten things then? How will it soften them? And to what, I pray you, will you trust for fair treatment then, if you will be so against me now?"

She shuddered. "To the mercy of my husband," she said in a low voice. And her chin sank on her breast.

"You will be content to trust to that?" he answered grimly. And his tone and the lifting of his brow promised little clemency. "Bethink you! 'Tis your rights now, and your terms, Mademoiselle! And then it will be only my mercy—Madame."

"I am content," she muttered faintly.

"And the Lord have mercy on my soul, is what you would add," he retorted, "so much trust have you in my mercy! And you are right! You are right, since you have played this trick on me. But as you will. If you will have it so, have it so! You shall stand on your conditions now; you shall have

your pennyweight and full advantage, and the rigour of the pact. But afterwards—afterwards, Madame de Tavannes——"

He did not finish his sentence, for at the first word which granted her petition, Mademoiselle had sunk down on the low wooden window-seat beside which she stood, and, cowering into its farthest corner, her face hidden on her arms, had burst into violent weeping. Her hair, hastily knotted up in the hurry of the previous night, hung in a thick plait to the curve of her waist; the nape of her neck showed beside it milk-white. The man stood awhile contemplating her in silence, his gloomy eyes watching the pitiful movement of her shoulders, the convulsive heaving of her figure. But he did not offer to touch her, and at length he turned about. First one and then the other of her women quailed and shrank under his gaze; he seemed about to add something. But he did not speak. The sentence he had left unfinished, the long look he bent on the weeping girl as he turned from her, spoke more eloquently of the future than a score of orations.

"*Afterwards, Madame de Tavannes!*"

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE HALL OF THE LOUVRE.

It is a strange thing that love—or passion, if the sudden fancy for Mademoiselle which had seized Count Hannibal be deemed unworthy of the higher name—should so entirely possess the souls of those who harbour it that the greatest events and the most astounding catastrophes, even measures which set their mark for all time on a nation, are to them of importance only so far as they affect the pursuit of the fair one.

As Tavannes, after leaving Mademoiselle, rode through the paved lanes, beneath the gabled houses, and under the shadow of the Gothic spires of his day, he saw a score of sights, moving to pity, or wrath, or wonder. He saw Paris as a city sacked; a slaughter-house, where for a week a masque had moved to stately music; blood on the nailed doors and the close-set window bars; and at the corners of the ways strewn garments, broken weapons, the livid dead in heaps. But he saw all with eyes which in all and everywhere, among living and dead, sought only Tignonville; Tignonville first, and next a heretic minister, with enough of life in him to do his office.

Probably it was to this that one man hunted through Paris owed his escape that day. He sprang from a narrow passage full in Tavannes' view, and, hair on end, his eyes starting from his head, ran blindly—as a hare will run when chased—along the

street to meet Count Hannibal's company. The man's face was wet with the dews of death, his lungs seemed cracking, his breath hissed from him as he ran. His pursuers were hard on him, and, seeing him headed by Count Hannibal's party, yelled in triumph, holding him for dead. And dead he would have been within thirty seconds had Tavannes played his part. But his thoughts were elsewhere. Either he took the poor wretch for Tignonville, or for the minister on whom his mind was running; at any rate he suffered him to slip under the belly of his horse; then, to make matters worse, he wheeled to follow him in so untimely and clumsy a fashion that his horse blocked the way and stopped the pursuers in their tracks. The quarry slipped into an alley and vanished. The hunters stood and blasphemed, and even for a moment seemed inclined to resent the mistake. But Tavannes smiled; a broader smile lightened the faces of the six iron-clad men behind him; and for some reason the gang of ruffians thought better of it and slunk aside.

There are hard men, who feel scorn of the things which in the breasts of others excite pity. Tavannes' lip curled as he rode on through the streets, looking this way and that, and seeing what a King twenty-two years old had made of his capital. His lip curled most of all when he came, passing between the two tennis-courts, to the east gate of the Louvre, and found the entrance locked and guarded, and all communication between city and palace cut off. Such a proof of unkingly panic, in a crisis wrought by the King himself, astonished him less a few minutes later, when, the keys having been brought and the door opened, he entered the courtyard of the fortress.

Within and about the door of the gatehouse some three-score archers and arquebusiers stood to their arms; not in array, but in disorderly groups, from which the babble of voices, of feverish laughter, and strained jests rose without ceasing. The westering sun, of which the beams just topped the farther side of the quadrangle, fell slantwise on their armour, and heightened their exaggerated and restless movements. To a calm eye they seemed like men acting in a nightmare. Their fitful talk and disjointed gestures, their sweating brows and damp hair, no less than the sullen, brooding silence of one here and there, bespoke the abnormal and the terrible. There were livid faces among them, and twitching cheeks, and some who swallowed much; and some again who bared their crimson arms and bragged insanely of the part they had played. But perhaps the most striking thing was the thirst, the desire, the demand for news, and for fresh excitement. In the space of time it took him to pass through them, Count Hannibal heard a dozen rumours of what was passing in the city; that Montgomery and the gentlemen who had slept beyond the river had escaped on horseback in their shirts; that Guise had been shot in the pursuit; that he had captured the Vidame de Chartres and all the fugitives; that he had never left the city; that he was even then entering by the Porte de Bucy. Again that Biron had surrendered the Arsenal, that he had threatened to fire on the city, that he was dead, that with the Huguenots who had escaped he was marching on the Louvre, that——

And then Tavannes passed out of the blinding sunshine, and out of earshot of their babble, and had plain in his sight across the quadrangle, the new

façade, Italian, graceful, of the Renaissance; which rose in smiling contrast with the three dark Gothic sides that now, the central tower removed, frowned unimpeded at one another. But what was this which lay along the foot of the new Italian wall? This, round which some stood, gazing curiously, while others strewed fresh sand about it, or after long downward-looking glanced up to answer the question of a person at a window?

Death; and over death—death in its most cruel aspect—a cloud of buzzing, whirling flies, and the smell, never to be forgotten, of much spilled blood. From a doorway hard by came shrill bursts of hysterical laughter; and with the laughter plumped out, even as Tavannes crossed the court, a young girl, thrust forth it seemed by her fellows, for she turned about and struggled as she came. Once outside she hung back, giggling and protesting, half willing, half unwilling; and meeting Tavannes' eye thrust her way in again with a whirl of her petticoats, and a shriek. But before he had taken four paces she was out again.

He paused to see who she was, and his thoughts involuntarily went back to the woman he had left weeping in the upper room. Then he turned about again and stood to count the dead. He identified Piles, identified Pardaillan, identified Soubise—whose corpse the murderers had robbed of the last rag—and Touchet and St. Galais. He made his reckoning with an unmoved face, and with the same face stopped and stared, and moved from one to another; had he not seen the slaughter about "*le petit homme*" at Jarnac, and the dead of three pitched fields? But when a bystander, smirking obsequiously, passed him a jest on Soubise, and with his finger pointed the jest, he had

the same hard unmoved face for the gibe as for the dead. And the jester shrank away, abashed and perplexed by his stare and his reticence.

Half way up the staircase to the great gallery or guardroom above, Count Hannibal found his brother, the Marshal, huddled together in drunken slumber on a seat in a recess. In the gallery to which he passed on without awakening him, a crowd of courtiers and ladies, with arquebusiers and captains of the quarters, walked to and fro, talking in whispers; or peeped over shoulders towards the inner end of the hall, where the querulous voice of the King rose now and again above the hum. As Tavannes moved that way, Nançay, in the act of passing out, booted and armed for the road, met him and almost jostled him.

"Ah, well met, M. le Comte," he sneered, with as much hostility as he dared betray. "The King has asked for you twice."

"I am going to him. And you? Whither in such a hurry, M. Nançay?"

"To Chatillon."

"On pleasant business?"

"Enough that it is on the King's!" Nançay replied with unexpected temper. "I hope that you may find yours as pleasant!" he added with a grin. And he went on.

The gleam of malice in the man's eye warned Tavannes to pause. He looked round for someone who might be in the secret, saw the Provost of the Merchants and approached him. "What's amiss, M. le Charron?" he asked. "Is not the affair going as it should?"

"'Tis about the Arsenal, M. le Comte," the Provost answered busily. "M. de Biron is harbouring the

vermin there. He has lowered the portcullis and pointed his culverins over the gate and will not yield it or listen to reason. The King would bring him to terms, but no one will venture himself inside with the message. Rats in a trap, you know, bite hard, and care little whom they bite."

"I begin to understand."

"Precisely, M. le Comte. His Majesty would have sent M. de Nançay. But he elected to go to Chatillon, to seize the young brood there. The Admiral's children, you comprehend."

"Whose teeth are not yet grown! He was wise."

"To be sure, M. de Tavannes, to be sure. But the King was annoyed, and on top of that came a priest with complaints, and if I may make so bold as to advise you, you will not——"

But Tavannes fancied that he had caught the gist of the difficulty, and with a nod he moved on; and so he missed the point of the warning which the other had it in his mind to give. A moment and he reached the inner circle, and there halted, disconcerted, nay, taken aback. For as soon as he showed his face, the King, who was pacing to and fro like a caged beast, before a table at which three clerks knelt on cushions, espied him and stood still. With a glare of something like madness in his eyes, Charles raised his hand with a shaking finger and singled him out.

"So, by G—d, you are there!" he cried, with a volley of blasphemy. And he signed to those about Count Hannibal to stand away from him. "You are there, are you? And you are not afraid to show your face? I tell you, it's you and such as you bring us into contempt! so that it is said everywhere Guise

does all and serves God, and we follow because we must! It's you, and such as you, are stumbling-blocks to our good folk of Paris! Are you traitor, sirrah?" he continued with passion, "or are you of our brother Alençon's opinions, that you traverse our orders to the damnation of your soul and our discredit? Are you traitor? Or are you heretic? Or what are you? God in heaven, will you answer me, man, or shall I send you where you will find your tongue?"

"I know not of what your Majesty accuses me," Count Hannibal answered, with a scarcely perceptible shrug of the shoulders.

"I? 'Tis not I," the King retorted. His hair hung damp on his brow, and he dried his hands continually; while his gestures had the ill-measured and eccentric violence of an epileptic. "Here, you! Speak, father, and confound him!"

Then Tavannes discovered on the farther side of the circle the priest whom his brother had ridden down that morning. Father Pezelay's pale hatchet-face gleamed paler than ordinary; and a great bandage hid one temple and part of his face. But, below the bandage, the flame of his eyes was not lessened, nor the venom of his tongue. To the King he had come—for no other would deal with his violent opponent; to the King's presence! and, as he prepared to blast his adversary, now his chance was come, his long lean frame, in its narrow black cassock, seemed to grow longer, leaner, more baleful, more snake-like. He stood there a fitting representative of the dark fanaticism of Paris, which Charles and his successor—the last of a doomed line—alternately used as tool or feared as master; and to which the most de-

based and the most immoral of courts paid, in its sober hours, a vile and slavish homage. Even in the midst of the drunken, shameless courtiers—who stood, if they stood for anything, for that other influence of the day, the Renaissance—he was to be reckoned with; and Count Hannibal knew it. He knew that in the eyes not of Charles only, but of nine out of ten who listened to him, a priest was more sacred than a virgin, and a tonsure than all the virtues of spotless innocence.

"Shall the King give with one hand and withdraw with the other?" the priest began, in a voice hoarse yet strident, a voice borne high above the crowd on the wings of passion. "Shall he spare of the best of the men and the maidens whom God hath doomed, whom the Church hath devoted, whom the King hath given? Is the King's hand shortened or his word annulled that a man does as he forbiddeth and leaves undone what he commandeth? Is God mocked? Woe, woe unto you," he continued, turning swiftly, arms uplifted, towards Tavannes, "who please yourself with the red and white of their maidens and take of the best of the spoil, sparing where the King's word is 'Spare not!' Who strike at Holy Church with the sword! Who——"

"Answer, sirrah!" Charles cried, spurning the floor in his fury. He could not listen long to any man. "Is it so? Is it so? Do you do these things?"

Count Hannibal shrugged his shoulders and was about to answer, when a thick, drunken voice rose from the crowd behind him. "Is it what? Eh! Is it what?" it droned. And a figure with bloodshot eyes, disordered beard, and rich clothes awry, forced its way through the obsequious circle. It was Marshal

Tavannes. "Eh, what? You'd beard the King, would you?" he hiccoughed truculently, his eyes on Father Pezelay, his hand on his sword. "Were you a priest ten times——"

"Silence!" Charles cried, almost foaming with rage at this fresh interruption. "It's not he, fool! 'Tis your pestilent brother."

"Who touches my brother touches Tavannes!" the Marshal answered with a menacing gesture. He was sober enough, it appeared, to hear what was said, but not to comprehend its drift; and this caused a titter, which immediately excited his rage. He turned and seized the nearest laugher by the ear. "Insolent!" he cried. "I will teach you to laugh when the King speaks! Puppy! Who laughs at his Majesty or touches my brother has to do with Tavannes!"

The King, in a rage that almost deprived him of speech, stamped the floor twice. "Idiot!" he cried. "Imbecile! Let the man go! 'Tis not he! 'Tis your heretic brother, I tell you! By all the Saints! By the body of——" and he poured forth a flood of oaths. "Will you listen to me and be silent! Will you—your brother——"

"If he be not your Majesty's servant, I will kill him with this sword!" the irrepressible Marshal struck in. "As I have killed ten to-day! Ten!" And, staggering back, he only saved himself from falling by clutching Chicot about the neck.

"Steady, my pretty Maréchale!" the jester cried, chucking him under the chin with one hand, while with some difficulty he supported him with the other —for he, too, was far from sober—

"Pretty Margot, toy with me,
Maiden bashful——"

"Silence!" Charles cried, darting forth his long arms in a fury of impatience. "God, have I killed every man of sense? Are you all gone mad? Silence! Do you hear? Silence! And let me hear what he has to say," with a movement towards Count Hannibal. "And look you, sirrah," he continued with a curse, "see that it be to the purpose!"

"If it be a question of your Majesty's service," Tavannes answered. "And obedience to your Majesty's orders, I am deeper in it than he who stands there!" with a sign towards the priest. "I give my word for that. And I will prove it."

"How, sir?" Charles cried. "How, how, how? How will you prove it?"

"By doing for you, sire, what he will not do!" Tavannes answered scornfully. "Let him stand out, and if he will serve his Church as I will serve my King——"

"Blaspheme not!" cried the priest.

"Chatter not!" Tavannes retorted hardily, "but do! Better is he," he continued, "who takes a city than he who slays women! Nay, sire," he went on hurriedly, seeing the King start, "be not angry, but hear me! You would send to Biron, to the Arsenal? You seek a messenger, sire? Then let the good father be the man. Let him take your Majesty's will to Biron, and let him see the Grand Master face to face, and bring him to reason. Or, if he will not, I will! Let that be the test!"

"Ay, ay!" cried Marshal de Tavannes, "you say well, brother! Let him!"

"And if he will not, I will!" Tavannes repeated. "Let that be the test, sire."

The King wheeled suddenly to Father Pezelay.

"You hear, father?" he said. "What say you?"

The priest's face grew sallow, and more sallow. He knew that the walls of the Arsenal sheltered men whose hands no convention and no order of Biron's would keep from his throat, were the grim gate and frowning culverins once passed; men who had seen their women and children, their wives and sisters immolated at his word, and now asked naught but to stand face to face and eye to eye with him and tear him limb from limb before they died! The challenge, therefore, was one-sided and unfair; but for that very reason it shook him. The astuteness of the man who, taken by surprise, had conceived this snare filled him with dread. He dared not accept, and he scarcely dared to refuse the offer. And meantime the eyes of the courtiers, who grinned in their beards, were on him. At length he spoke, but it was in a voice which had lost its boldness and assurance.

"It is not for me to clear myself," he cried, shrill and violent, "but for those who are accused, for those who have belied the King's word, and set at naught his Christian orders. For you, Count Hannibal, heretic, or no better than heretic, it is easy to say 'I go.' For you go but to your own, and your own will receive you!"

"Then you will not go?" with a jeer.

"At your command? No!" the priest shrieked with passion. "His Majesty knows whether I serve him."

"I know," Charles cried, stamping his foot in a fury, "that you all serve me when it pleases you! That you are all sticks of the same faggot, wood of the same bundle, hell-babes in your own business, and sluggards in mine! You kill to-day and you'll lay it

to me to-morrow! Ay, you will! you will!" he repeated frantically, and drove home the asseveration with a fearful oath. "The dead are as good servants as you! Foucauld was better! Foucauld? Foucauld? Ah, my God!"

And abruptly in presence of them all, with the sacred name, which he so often defiled, on his lips, Charles turned, and covering his face burst into childish weeping; while a great silence fell on all—on Bussy with the blood of his cousin Resnel on his point, on Fervacques, the betrayer of his friend, on Chicot, the slayer of his rival, on Cocconnas the cruel—on men with hands unwashed from the slaughter, and on the shameless women who lined the walls; on all who used this sobbing man for their stepping-stone, and, to attain their ends and gain their purposes, trampled his dull soul in blood and mire.

One looked at another in consternation. Fear grew in eyes that a moment before were bold; cheeks turned pale that a moment before were hectic. If *he* changed as rapidly as this, if so little dependence could be placed on his moods or his resolutions, who was safe? Whose turn might it not be to-morrow? Or who might not be held accountable for the deeds done this day? Many, from whom remorse had seemed far distant a while before, shuddered and glanced behind them. It was as if the dead who lay stark without the doors, ay, and the countless dead of Paris, with whose shrieks the air was laden, had flocked in shadowy shape into the hall; and there, standing beside their murderers, had whispered with their cold breath in the living ears, "A reckoning! A reckoning! As I am, thou shalt be!"

It was Count Hannibal who broke the spell and the

silence, and with his hand on his brother's shoulder stood forward. "Nay, sire," he cried, in a voice which rang defiant in the roof, and seemed to challenge alike the living and the dead, "if all deny the deed, yet will not I! What we have done we have done! So be it! The dead are dead! So be it! For the rest, your Majesty has still one servant who will do your will, one soldier whose life is at your disposition! I have said I will go, and I go, sire. And you, churchman," he continued, turning in bitter scorn to the priest, "do you go too—to church! To church, shaveling! Go, watch and pray for us! Fast and flog for us! Whip those shoulders, whip them till the blood runs down! For it is all, it seems, you will do for your King!"

Charles turned. "Silence, railer!" he said in a broken voice. "Sow no more troubles! Already," a shudder shook his tall ungainly form, "I see blood, blood, blood everywhere! Blood? Ah, God, shall I from this time see anything else? But there is no turning back. There is no undoing. So, do you go to Biron. And do you," he went on, sullenly addressing Marshal Tavannes, "take him and tell him what it is needful he should know."

"'Tis done, sire!" the Marshal cried with a hiccough. "Come, brother!"

But when the two, the courtiers making quick way for them, had passed down the hall to the door, the Marshal tapped Hannibal's sleeve. "It was touch and go," he muttered; it was plain he had been more sober than he seemed. "Mind you, it does not do to thwart our little master in his fits! Remember that another time, or worse will come of it, brother. As it is, you came out of it finely and tripped that

black devil's heels to a marvel! But you won't be so mad as to go to Biron?"

"Yes," Count Hannibal answered coldly. "I shall go."

"Better not! Better not!" the Marshal answered. "'Twill be easier to go in than to come out—with a whole throat! Have you taken wild cats in the hollow of a tree? The young first, and then the she-cat? Well, it will be that! Take my advice, brother. Have after Montgomery, if you please, ride with Nançay to Chatillon—he is mounting now—go where you please out of Paris, but don't go there! Biron hates us, hates me. And for the King, if he do not see you for a few days, 'twill blow over in a week."

Count Hannibal shrugged his shoulders. "No," he said, "I shall go."

The Marshal stared a moment. "Morbleu!" he said, "why? 'Tis not to please the King, I know. What do you think to find there, brother?"

"A minister," Hannibal answered gently. "I want one with life in him, and they are scarce in the open. So I must to covert after him." And, twitching his sword-belt a little nearer to his hand, he passed across the court to the gate, and to his horses. The Marshal went back laughing, and, slapping his thigh as he entered the hall, jostled by accident a gentleman who was passing out.

"What is it?" the Gascon cried hotly; for it was Chicot he had jostled.

"Who touches my brother touches Tavannes!" the Marshal hiccoughed. And, smiting his thigh anew, he went off into another fit of laughter.

CHAPTER XIII.

DIPLOMACY.

WHERE the old wall of Paris, of which no vestige remains, ran down on the east to the north bank of the river, the space in the angle between the Seine and the ramparts beyond the Rue St. Pol wore at this date an aspect typical of the troubles of the time. Along the waterside the gloomy old Palace of St. Pol, once the residence of the mad King Charles the Sixth —and his wife, the abandoned Isabeau de Bavière— sprawled its maze of mouldering courts and ruined galleries, a dreary monument of the Gothic days which were passing from France. Its spacious curtilage and dark pleasaunces covered all the ground between the river and the Rue St. Antoine; and north of this, under the shadow of the eight great towers of the Bastille, which looked, four outward to check the stranger, four inward to bridle the town, a second palace, beginning where St. Pol ended, carried the realm of decay to the city wall.

This second palace was the Hôtel des Tournelles, a fantastic medley of turrets, spires, and gables, that equally with its neighbour recalled the days of the English domination; it had been the abode of the Regent Bedford. From his time it had remained for a hundred years the town residence of the kings of France; but the death of Henry II., slain in its lists by the lance of the same Montgomery who was this

day fleeing for his life before Guise, had given his widow a distaste for it. Catherine de Médicis, her sons, and the Court had abandoned it; already its gardens lay a tangled wilderness, its roofs let in the rain, rats played where kings had slept; and in "our palace of the Tournelles" reigned only silence and decay. Unless, indeed, as was whispered abroad, the grim shade of the eleventh Louis sometimes walked in its desolate precincts.

In the innermost angle between the ramparts and the river, shut off from the rest of Paris by the decaying courts and enceintes of these forsaken palaces, stood the Arsenal. Destroyed in great part by the explosion of a powder-mill a few years earlier, it was in the main new; and by reason of its river frontage, which terminated at the ruined tower of Billy, and its proximity to the Bastille, it was esteemed one of the keys of Paris. It was the appanage of the Master of the Ordnance, and within its walls M. de Biron, a Huguenot in politics, if not in creed, who held the office at this time, had secured himself on the first alarm. During the day he had admitted a number of refugees, whose courage or good luck had led them to his gate; and as night fell—on such a carnage as the hapless city had not beheld since the great slaughter of the Armagnacs, one hundred and fifty-four years earlier—the glow of his matches through the dusk, and the sullen tramp of his watchmen as they paced the walls, indicated that there was still one place in Paris where the King's will did not run.

In comparison of the disorder which prevailed in the city, a deadly quiet reigned here; a stillness so chill that a timid man must have stood and hesitated to approach. But a stranger who about nightfall rode

down the street towards the entrance, a single footman running at his stirrup, only nodded a stern approval of the preparations. As he drew nearer he cast an attentive eye this way and that; nor stayed until a hoarse challenge brought him up when he had come within six horses' lengths of the Arsenal gate. He reined up then, and raising his voice, asked in clear tones for M. de Biron.

"Go," he continued boldly, "tell the Grand Master that one from the King is here, and would speak with him."

"From the King of France?" the officer on the gate asked.

"Surely! Is there more than one King in France?"

A curse and a bitter cry of "King? King Herod!" were followed by a muttered discussion that, in the ears of one of the two who waited in the gloom below, boded little good. The two could descry figures moving to and fro before the faint red light of the smouldering matches; and presently a man on the gate kindled a torch, and held it so as to fling its light downward. The stranger's attendant cowered behind the horse. "Have a care, my lord!" he whispered. "They are aiming at us!"

If so the rider's bold front and unmoved demeanour gave them pause. Presently, "I will send for the Grand Master" the man who had spoken before announced. "In whose name, monsieur?"

"No matter," the stranger answered. "Say, one from the King."

"You are alone?"

"I shall enter alone."

The assurance seemed to be satisfactory, for the man answered "Good!" and after a brief delay a

wicket in the gate was opened, the portcullis creaked upward, and a plank was thrust across the ditch. The horseman waited until the preparations were complete; then he slid to the ground, threw his rein to the servant, and boldly walked across. In an instant he left behind him the dark street, the river, and the sounds of outrage, which the night breeze bore from the farther bank, and found himself within the vaulted gateway, in a bright glare of light, the centre of a ring of gleaming eyes and angry faces.

The light blinded him for a few seconds; but the guards, on their side, were in no better case. For the stranger was masked; and in their ignorance who it was looked at them through the slits in the black velvet they stared, disconcerted, and at a loss. There were some there with naked weapons in their hands who would have struck him through had they known who he was; and more who would have stood aside while the deed was done. But the uncertainty—that and the masked man's tone paralysed them. For they reflected that he might be any one. Condé, indeed, stood too small, but Navarre, if he lived, might fill that cloak; or Guise, or Anjou, or the King himself. And while some would not have scrupled to strike the blood royal, more would have been quick to protect and avenge it. And so before the dark uncertainty of the mask, before the riddle of the smiling eyes which glittered through the slits, they stared irresolute; until a hand, the hand of one bolder than his fellows, was raised to pluck away the screen.

The unknown dealt the fellow a buffet with his fist. "Down, rascal!" he said hoarsely. "And you"—to the officer—"show me instantly to M. de Biron!"

But the lieutenant, who stood in fear of his men, looked at him doubtfully. "Nay," he said, "not so fast!" And one of the others, taking the lead, cried, "No! We may have no need of M. de Biron. Your name, monsieur, first."

With a quick movement the stranger gripped the officer's wrist. "Tell your master," he said, "that he who clasped his wrist *thus* on the night of Pentecost is here, and would speak with him! And say, mark you, that I will come to him, not he to me!"

The sign and the tone imposed upon the boldest. Two-thirds of the watch were Huguenots, who burned to avenge the blood of their fellows; and these, overriding their officer, had agreed to deal with the intruder, if a Papegot, without recourse to the Grand Master, whose moderation they dreaded. A knife-thrust in the ribs, and another body in the ditch—why not, when such things were done outside? But even these doubted now; and M. Peridol, the lieutenant, reading in the eyes of his men the suspicions which he had himself conceived, was only anxious to obey, if they would let him. So gravely was he impressed, indeed, by the bearing of the unknown that he turned when he had withdrawn, and came back to assure himself that the men meditated no harm in his absence; nor until he had exchanged a whisper with one of them would he leave them and go.

While he was gone on his errand the envoy leaned against the wall of the gateway, and, with his chin sunk on his breast and his mind fallen into reverie, seemed unconscious of the dark glances of which he was the target. He remained in this position until the officer came back, followed by a man with a lantern. Their coming roused the unknown, who, in-

vited to follow Peridol, traversed two courts without remark, and in the same silence entered a building in the extreme eastern corner of the enceinte abutting on the ruined Tour de Billy. Here, in an upper floor, the Governor of the Arsenal had established his temporary lodging.

The chamber into which the stranger was introduced betrayed the haste in which it had been prepared for its occupant. Two silver lamps which hung from the beams of the unceiled roof shed light on a medley of arms and inlaid armour, of parchments, books, and steel caskets, which encumbered not the tables only, but the stools and chests that, after the fashion of that day, stood formally along the arras. In the midst of the disorder, on the bare floor, walked the man who, more than any other, had been instrumental in drawing the Huguenots to Paris —and to their doom. It was not wonderful that the events of the day, the surprise and horror still rode his mind; nor that even he who passed for a model of stiffness and reticence betrayed for once the indignation which filled his breast. Until the officer had withdrawn and closed the door he did, indeed, keep silence; standing beside the table and eyeing his visitor with a lofty port and a stern glance. But the moment he was assured that they were alone he spoke.

"Your Highness may unmask now," he said, making no effort to hide his contempt. "Yet were you well advised to take the precaution, since you had hardly come at me in safety without it. Had those who keep the gate seen you, I would not have answered for your Highness's life! The more shame," he continued vehemently, "on the deeds of this day

which have compelled the brother of a King of France to hide his face in his own capital and in his own fortress. For I dare to say, Monsieur, what no other will say, now the Admiral is dead. You have brought back the days of the Armagnacs. You have brought bloody days and an evil name on France, and I pray God that you may not pay in your turn what you have exacted. But if you continue to be advised by M. de Guise, this I will say, Monsieur"—and his voice fell low and stern. "Burgundy slew Orleans, indeed; but he came in his turn to the Bridge of Montereau."

"You take me for Monsieur?" the unknown asked. And it was plain that he smiled under his mask.

Biron's face altered. "I take you," he answered sharply, "for him whose sign you sent me."

"The wisest are sometimes astray," the other answered with a low laugh. And he took off his mask.

The Grand Master started back, his eyes sparkling with anger. "M. de Tavannes?" he cried, and for a moment he was silent in sheer astonishment. Then, striking his hand on the table, "What means this trickery?" he asked.

"It is of the simplest," Tavannes answered coolly. "And yet, as you just now said, I had hardly come at you without it. And I had to come at you. No, M. de Biron," he added quickly, as Biron in a rage laid his hand on a bell which stood beside him on the table, "you cannot that way undo what is done."

"I can at least deliver you," the Grand Master answered, in heat, "to those who will deal with you as you have dealt with us and ours."

"It will avail you nothing," Count Hannibal replied soberly. "For see here, Grand Master, I come

from the King. If you are at war with him, and hold his fortress in his teeth, I am his ambassador and sacrosanct. If you are at peace with him and hold it at his will, I am his servant, and safe also."

"At peace and safe?" Biron cried, his voice trembling with indignation. "And are those safe or at peace who came here trusting to *his* word, who lay in his palace and slept in his beds? Where are they, and how have they fared, that you dare appeal to the law of nations, or he to the loyalty of Biron? And for you to beard me, whose brother to-day hounded the dogs of this vile city on the noblest in France, who have leagued yourself with a crew of foreigners to do a deed which will make our country stink in the nostrils of the world when we are dust! You, to come here and talk of peace and safety! M. de Tavannes"—and he struck his hand on the table—"you are a bold man. I know why the King had a will to send you, but I know not why you had the will to come."

"That I will tell you later," Count Hannibal answered coolly. "For the King, first. My message is brief, M. de Biron. Have you a mind to hold the scales in France?"

"Between?" Biron asked contemptuously.

"Between the Lorrainers and the Huguenots."

The Grand Master scowled fiercely. "I have played the go-between once too often," he growled.

"It is no question of going between, it is a question of holding between," Tavannes answered coolly. "It is a question—but, in a word, have you a mind, M. de Biron, to be Governor of Rochelle? The King, having dealt the blow that has been struck to-day, looks to follow up severity, as a wise ruler should,

with indulgence. And to quiet the minds of the Rochellois he would set over them a ruler at once acceptable to them—or war must come of it—and faithful to his Majesty. Such a man, M. de Biron, will in such a post be Master of the Kingdom; for he will hold the doors of Janus, and as he bridles his sea-dogs, or unchains them, there will be peace or war in France."

"Is all that from the King's mouth?" Biron asked with sarcasm. But his passion had died down. He was grown thoughtful, suspicious; he eyed the other intently as if he would read his heart.

"The offer is his, and the reflections are mine," Tavannes answered drily. "Let me add one more. The Admiral is dead. The King of Navarre and the Prince of Condé are prisoners. Who is now to balance the Italians and the Guises? The Grand Master —if he be wise and content to give the law to France from the citadel of Rochelle."

Biron stared at the speaker in astonishment at his frankness. "You are a bold man," he cried at last. "But *timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*," he continued bitterly. "You offer, sir, too much."

"The offer is the King's."

"And the conditions? The price?"

"That you remain quiet, M. de Biron."

"In the Arsenal?"

"In the Arsenal. And do not too openly counteract the King's will. That is all."

The Grand Master looked puzzled. "I will give up no one," he said. "No one! Let that be understood."

"The King requires no one."

A pause. Then, "Does M. de Guise know of the

offer?" Biron inquired; and his eye grew bright. He hated the Guises and was hated by them. It was *there* he was a Huguenot.

"He has gone far to-day," Count Hannibal answered drily. "And if no worse come of it should be content. Madame Catherine knows of it."

The Grand Master was aware that Marshal Tavannes depended on the Queen-mother; and he shrugged his shoulders. "Ay, 'tis like her policy," he muttered. "'Tis like her!" And pointing his guest to a cushioned chest which stood against the wall, he sat down in a chair beside the table and thought awhile, his brow wrinkled, his eyes dreaming. By-and-by he laughed sourly. "You have lighted the fire," he said, "and would fain I put it out."

"We would have you hinder it spreading."

"You have done the deed and are loth to pay the blood-money. That is it, is it?"

"We prefer to pay it to M. de Biron," Count Hannibal answered civilly.

Again the Grand Master was silent awhile. At length he looked up and fixed Tavannes with eyes keen as steel. "What is behind?" he growled. "Say, man, what is it? What is behind?"

"If there be aught behind, I do not know it," Tavannes answered steadfastly.

M. de Biron relaxed the fixity of his gaze. "But you said that you had an object?" he returned.

"I had—in being the bearer of the message."

"What was it?"

"My object? To learn two things."

"The first, if it please you?" The Grand Master's chin stuck out a little, as he spoke.

"Have you in the Arsenal a M. de Tignonville, a gentleman of Poitou?"

"I have not," Biron answered curtly. "The second?"

"Have you here a Huguenot minister?"

"I have not. And if I had I should not give him up," he added firmly.

Tavannes shrugged his shoulders. "I have a use for one," he said carelessly. "But it need not harm him."

"For what, then, do you need him?"

"To marry me."

The other stared. "But you are a Catholic," he said.

"But she is a Huguenot," Tavannes answered.

The Grand Master did not attempt to hide his astonishment. "And she sticks on that?" he exclaimed. "To-day?"

"She sticks on that. To-day."

"To-day? *Nom de Dieu!* To-day! Well," brushing the matter aside after a pause of bewilderment, "any way, I cannot help her. I have no minister here. If there be aught else I can do for her——"

"Nothing, I thank you," Tavannes answered. "Then it only remains for me to take your answer to the King?" And he rose politely, and taking his mask from the table prepared to assume it.

M. de Biron gazed at him a moment without speaking, as if he pondered on the answer he should give. At length he nodded, and rang the bell which stood beside him.

"The mask!" he muttered in a low voice as footsteps sounded without. And, obedient to the hint, Tavannes disguised himself. A second later the offi-

cer who had introduced him opened the door and entered.

"Peridol," M. de Biron said—he had risen to his feet—"I have received a message which needs confirmation; and to obtain this I must leave the Arsenal. I am going to the house—you will remember this—of Marshal Tavannes, who will be responsible for my person; in the meantime this gentleman will remain under strict guard in the south chamber upstairs. You will treat him as a hostage, with all respect, and will allow him to preserve his *incognito*. But if I do not return by noon to-morrow, you will deliver him to the men below, who will know how to deal with him."

Count Hannibal made no attempt to interrupt him, nor did he betray the discomfiture which he undoubtedly felt. But as the Grand Master paused, "M. de Biron," he said, in a voice harsh and low, "you will answer to me for this!" And his eyes glittered through the slits in the mask.

"Possibly, but not to-day or to-morrow!" Biron replied, shrugging his shoulders contemptuously. "Peridol! see the gentleman bestowed as I have ordered, and then return to me. Monsieur," with a bow, half courteous, half ironical, "let me commend to you the advantages of silence and your mask." And he waved his hand in the direction of the door.

A moment Count Hannibal hesitated. He was in the heart of a hostile fortress where the resistance of a single man armed to the teeth must have been futile; and he was unarmed, save for a poniard. Nevertheless, for a moment the impulse to spring on Biron, and with the dagger at his throat to make his life the price of a safe passage, was strong. Then—

for with the warp of a harsh and passionate character were interwrought an odd shrewdness and some things little suspected—he resigned himself. Bowing gravely, he turned with dignity, and in silence followed the officer from the room.

Peridol had two men with lanterns in waiting at the door. From one of these the lieutenant took the light, and, with an air at once sullen and deferential, led the way up the stone staircase to the floor over that in which M. de Biron had his lodging. Tavannes followed; the two guards came last, carrying the second lantern. At the head of the staircase, whence a bare passage ran north and south, the procession turned right-handed, and, passing two doors, halted before the third and last, which faced them at the end of the passage. The lieutenant unlocked it with a key which he took from a hook beside the doorpost. Then, holding up his light, he invited his charge to enter.

The room was not small, but it was low in the roof, and prison-like, it had bare walls and smoke-marks on the ceiling. The window, set in a deep recess, the floor of which rose a foot above that of the room, was unglazed; and through the gloomy orifice the night wind blew in, laden even on that August evening with the dank mist of the river flats. A table, two stools, and a truckle bed without straw or covering made up the furniture; but Peridol, after glancing round, ordered one of the men to fetch a truss of straw and the other to bring up a pitcher of wine. While they were gone Tavannes and he stood silently waiting, until, observing that the captive's eyes sought the window, the lieutenant laughed.

"No bars?" he said. "No, monsieur, and no need

of them. You will not go by that road, bars or no bars."

"What is below?" Count Hannibal asked carelessly. "The river?"

"Yes, monsieur," with a grin, "but not water. Mud, and six feet of it, soft as Christmas porridge, but not so sweet. I've known two puppies thrown in under this window that did not weigh more than a fat pullet apiece. One was gone before you could count fifty, and the other did not live thrice as long—nor would have lasted that time, but that it fell on the first and clung to it."

Tavannes dismissed the matter with a shrug, and, drawing his cloak about him, set a stool against the wall and sat down. The men who brought in the wine and the bundle of straw were inquisitive, and would have loitered, scanning him stealthily; but Peridol hurried them away. The lieutenant himself stayed only to cast a glance round the room and to mutter that he would return when his lord returned; then, with a "Good night" which said more for his manners than his good will, he followed them out. A moment later the grating of the key in the lock and the sound of the bolts as they sped home told Tavannes that he was a prisoner.

CHAPTER XIV.

TOO SHORT A SPOON.

COUNT HANNIBAL remained seated, his chin sunk on his breast, until his ear assured him that the three men had descended the stairs to the floor below. Then he rose, and, taking the lantern from the table, on which Peridol had placed it, he went softly to the door, which, like the window, stood in a recess—in this case the prolongation of the passage. A brief scrutiny satisfied him that escape that way was impossible, and he turned, after a cursory glance at the floor and ceiling, to the dark, windy aperture which yawned at the end of the apartment. Placing the lantern on the table, and covering it with his cloak, he mounted the window recess, and, stepping to the unguarded edge, looked out.

He knew, rather than saw, that Peridol had told the truth. The smell of the aguish flats which fringed that part of Paris rose strong in his nostrils. He guessed that the sluggish arm of the Seine which divided the Arsenal from the Île des Louviers crawled below; but the night was dark, and it was impossible to discern land from water. He fancied that he could trace the outline of the island—an uninhabited place, given up to wood piles; but the lights of the college quarter beyond it, which rose feebly twinkling, to the crown of St. Geneviève, confused his sight and rendered the nearer gloom more opaque. From that

direction and from the Cité to his right came sounds which told of a city still heaving in its blood-stained sleep, and even in its dreams planning further excesses. Now a distant shot, and now a faint murmur on one of the bridges, or a far-off cry, raucous, sudden, curdled the blood. But even of what was passing under cover of the darkness, he could learn little; and after standing awhile with a hand on either side of the window he found the night air chill. He stepped back, and, descending to the floor, uncovered the lantern and set it on the table. His thoughts travelled back to the preparations he had made the night before with a view to securing Mademoiselle's person, and he considered, with a grim smile, how little he had foreseen that within twenty-four hours he would himself be a prisoner. Presently, finding his mask oppressive, he removed it, and, laying it on the table before him, sat scowling at the light.

Biron had jockeyed him cleverly. Well, the worse for Armand de Gontaut de Biron if after this adventure the luck went against him! But in the meantime? In the meantime his fate was sealed if harm befell Biron. And what the King's real mind in Biron's case was, and what the Queen-Mother's, he could not say; just as it was impossible to predict how far, when they had the Grand Master at their mercy, they would resist the temptation to add him to the victims. If Biron placed himself at once in Marshal Tavannes' hands, all might be well. But if he ventured within the long arm of the Guises, or went directly to the Louvre, the fact that with the Grand Master's fate Count Hannibal's was bound up, would not weigh a straw. In such crises the great sacrificed the less great, the less great the small, with-

out a scruple. And the Guises did not love Count Hannibal; he was not loved by many. Even the strength of his brother the Marshal stood rather in the favour of the King's heir, for whom he had won the battle of Jarnac, than intrinsically; and, durable in ordinary times, might snap in the clash of forces and interests which the desperate madness of this day had let loose on Paris.

It was not the peril in which he stood, however—though, with the cold clear eye of the man who had often faced peril, he appreciated it to a nicety—that Count Hannibal found least bearable, but his enforced inactivity. He had thought to ride the whirlwind and direct the storm, and out of the danger of others to compact his own success. Instead he lay here, not only powerless to guide his destiny, which hung on the discretion of another, but unable to stretch forth a finger to further his plans.

As he sat looking darkly at the lantern, his mind followed Biron and his riders through the midnight streets: along St. Antoine and La Verrerie, through the gloomy narrows of the Rue la Ferronerie, and so past the house in the Rue St. Honoré where Mademoiselle sat awaiting the morrow—sat awaiting Tignonville, the minister, the marriage! Doubtless there were still bands of plunderers roaming to and fro; at the barriers troops of archers stopping the suspected; at the windows pale faces gazing down; at the gates of the Temple, and of the walled enclosures which largely made up the city, strong guards set to prevent invasion. Biron would go with sufficient to secure himself; and unless he encountered with the body-guard of Guise his passage would quiet the town. But was it so certain that *she* was safe? He knew his

men, and while he had been free he had not hesitated to leave her in their care. But now that he could not go, now that he could not raise a hand to help, the confidence which had not failed him in straits more dangerous grew weak. He pictured the things which might happen, at which, in his normal frame of mind, he would have laughed. Now they troubled him so that he started at a shadow, so that he quailed at a thought. He, who last night, when free to act, had timed his coming and her rescue to a minute! Who had rejoiced in the peril, since with the glamour of such things foolish women were taken! Who had not flinched when the crowd roared most fiercely for her blood!

Why had he suffered himself to be trapped? Why indeed? And thrice in passion he paced the room. Long ago the famous Nostradamus had told him that he would live to be a king, but of the smallest kingdom in the world. "Every man is a king in his coffin," he had answered. "The grave is cold and your kingdom shall be warm," the wizard had rejoined. On which the courtiers had laughed, promising him a Moorish island and a black queen. And he had gibed with the rest, but secretly had taken note of the sovereign counties of France, their rulers and their heirs. Now he held the thought in horror, foreseeing no county, but the cage under the stifling tiles at Loches, in which Cardinal Balue and many another had worn out their hearts.

He came to that thought not by way of his own peril, but of Mademoiselle's; which affected him in so novel a fashion that he wondered at his folly. At last, tired of watching the shadows which the draught set dancing on the wall, he drew his cloak

about him and lay down on the straw. He had kept vigil the previous night, and in a few minutes, with a campaigner's ease, he was asleep.

Midnight had struck. About two the light in the lantern burned low in the socket, and with a soft sputtering went out. For an hour after that the room lay still, silent, dark; then slowly the grey dawn, the greyer for the river mist which wrapped the neighbourhood in a clammy shroud, began to creep into the room and discover the vague shapes of things. Again an hour passed, and the sun was rising above Montreuil, and here and there the river began to shimmer through the fog. But in the room it was barely daylight when the sleeper awoke, and sat up, his face expectant. Something had roused him. He listened.

His ear, and the habit of vigilance which a life of danger instils, had not deceived him. There were men moving in the passage; men who shuffled their feet impatiently. Had Biron returned? Or had aught happened to him, and were these men come to avenge him? Count Hannibal rose and stole across the boards to the door, and, setting his ear to it, listened.

He listened while a man might count a hundred and fifty, counting slowly. Then, for the third part of a second, he turned his head, and his eyes travelled the room. He stooped again and listened more closely, scarcely breathing. There were voices as well as feet to be heard now; one voice—he thought it was Peridol's—which held on long, now low, now rising into violence. Others were audible at intervals, but only in a growl or a bitter exclamation, that told of minds made up and hands which would not be re-

strained. He caught his own name, *Tavannes*—the mask was useless then! And once a noisy movement which came to nothing, foiled, he fancied, by Peridol.

He knew enough. He rose to his full height, and his eyes seemed a little closer together; an ugly smile curved his lips. His gaze travelled over the objects in the room, the bare stools and table, the lantern, the wine pitcher; beyond these, in a corner, the cloak and straw on the low bed. The light, cold and grey, fell cheerlessly on the dull chamber, and showed it in harmony with the ominous whisper which grew in the gallery; with the stern-faced listener who stood, his one hand on the door. He looked, but he found nothing to his purpose, nothing to serve his end, whatever his end was; and with a quick light step he left the door, mounted the window recess, and, poised on the very edge, looked down.

If he thought to escape that way his hope was desperate. The depth to the water-level was not, he judged, twelve feet. But Peridol had told the truth. Below lay not water, but a smooth surface of viscid slime, here luminous with the florescence of rottenness, there furrowed by a tiny runnel of moisture which sluggishly crept across it to the slow stream beyond. This quicksand, vile and treacherous, lapped the wall below the window, and more than accounted for the absence of bars or fastenings. But, leaning far out, he saw that it ended at the angle of the building, at a point twenty feet or so to the right of his position.

He sprang to the floor again, and listened an instant; then, with guarded movements—for there was fear in the air, fear in the silent room, and at any moment the rush might be made, the door burst in—

he set the lantern and wine pitcher on the floor, and took up the table in his arms. He began to carry it to the window, but, halfway thither, his eye told him that it would not pass through the opening, and he set it down again and glided to the bed. Again he was thwarted; the bed was screwed to the floor. Another might have despaired at that, but he rose with no sign of dismay, and listening, always listening, he spread his cloak on the floor, and deftly, with as little noise and rustling as might be, he piled the straw in it, compressed the bundle, and, cutting the bed-cords with his dagger, bound all together with them. In three steps he was in the embrasure of the window, and, even as the men in the passage thrust the lieutenant aside and with a sudden uproar came down to the door, he flung the bundle lightly and carefully to the right—so lightly and carefully, and with so nice and deliberate a calculation, that it seemed odd it fell beyond the reach of an ordinary leap.

An instant and he was on the floor again. The men had to unlock, to draw back the bolts, to draw back the door which opened outwards; their numbers, as well as their savage haste, impeded them. When they burst in at last, with a roar of "To the river! To the river!"—burst in a rush of struggling shoulders and lowered pikes, they found him standing, a solitary figure, on the further side of the table, his arms folded. And the sight of the passive figure for a moment stayed them.

"Say your prayers, child of Satan!" cried the leader, waving his weapon. "We give you one minute!"

"Ay, one minute!" his followers chimed in. "Be ready!"

"You would murder me?" he said with dignity.

And when they shouted assent, "Good!" he answered. "It is between you and M. de Biron, whose guest I am. But"—with a glance which passed round the ring of glaring eyes and working features—"I would leave a last word for some one. Is there any one here who values a safe-conduct from the King? 'Tis for two men coming and going for a fortnight." And he held up a slip of paper.

The leader cried "To hell with his safe-conduct! Say your prayers!"

But all were not of his mind; on one or two of the crimson savage faces—the faces, for the most part, of honest men maddened by their wrongs—flashed an avaricious gleam. A safe-conduct? To avenge, to slay, to kill—and to go safe! For some minds such a thing has an invincible fascination. A man thrust himself forward. "Ay, I'll have it!" he cried. "Give it here!"

"It is yours," Count Hannibal answered, "if you will carry ten words to Marshal Tavannes—when I am gone."

The man's neighbour laid a restraining hand on his shoulder. "And Marshal Tavannes will pay you finely," he said.

But Maudron, the man who had offered, shook off the hand. "If I take the message!" he muttered in a grim aside. "Do you think me mad?" And then aloud he cried, "Ay, I'll take your message! Give me the paper."

"You swear you will take it?"

The man had no intention of taking it, but he perjured himself and went forward. The others would have pressed round too, half in envy, half in scorn; but Tavannes by a gesture stayed them. "Gentle-

men, I ask a minute only," he said. "A minute for a dying man is not much. Your friends had as much." And the fellows, acknowledging the claim and assured that their victim could not escape, let Maudron go round the table to him.

The man was in haste and ill at ease, conscious of his evil intentions and the fraud he was practising; and at once greedy to have, yet ashamed of the bargain he was making. His attention was divided between the slip of paper, on which his eyes fixed themselves, and the attitude of his comrades; he paid little heed to Count Hannibal, whom he knew to be unarmed. Only when Tavannes seemed to ponder on his message, and to be fain to delay, "Go on," he muttered with brutal frankness; "your time is up!"

Tavannes started, the paper slipped from his fingers. Maudron saw a chance of getting it without committing himself, and quick as the thought leapt up in his mind he stooped, and grasped the paper, and would have leapt back with it! But quick as he, and quicker, Tavannes too stooped, gripped him by the waist, and with a prodigious effort, and a yell in which all the man's stormy nature, restrained to a part during the last few minutes, broke forth, he flung the ill-fated wretch head first through the window.

The movement carried Tavannes himself — even while his victim's scream rang through the chamber — into the embrasure. An instant he hung on the verge; then, as the men, a moment thunderstruck, sprang forward to avenge their comrade, he leapt out, jumping for the struggling body that had struck the mud, and now lay in it face downwards.

He alighted on it, and drove it deep into the quak-

ing slime; but he himself bounded off right-handed. The peril was appalling, the possibility untried, the chance one which only a doomed man would have taken. But he reached the straw-bale, and it gave him a momentary, a precarious footing. He could not regain his balance, he could not even for an instant stand upright on it. But from its support he leapt on convulsively, and as a pike, flung from above, wounded him in the shoulder, he fell his length in the slough—but forward, with his outstretched hands resting on soil of a harder nature. They sank, it is true, to the elbow, but he dragged his body forward on them, and forward, and freeing one by a last effort of strength—he could not free both, and, as it was, half his face was submerged—he reached out another yard, and gripped a balk of wood, which projected from the corner of the building for the purpose of fending off the stream in flood-time.

The men at the window shrieked with rage as he slowly drew himself from the slough, and stood from head to foot a pillar of mud. Shout as they might, they had no firearms, and, crowded together in the narrow embrasure, they could take no aim with their pikes. They could only look on in furious impotence, flinging curses at him until he passed from their view, behind the angle of the building.

Here for a score of yards a strip of hard foreshore ran between mud and wall. He struggled along it until he reached the end of the wall; then with a shuddering glance at the black heaving pit from which he had escaped, and which yet gurgled above the body of the hapless Maudron—a tribute to horror which even his fierce nature could not withhold—he turned and painfully climbed the river-bank. The

pike-wound in his shoulder was slight, but the effort had been supreme; the sweat poured from his brow, his visage was grey and drawn. Nevertheless, when he had put fifty paces between himself and the buildings of the Arsenal he paused, and turned. He saw that the men had run to other windows which looked that way; and his face lightened and his form dilated with triumph.

He shook his fist at them. "Ho, fools!" he cried, "you kill not Tavannes so! Till our next meeting at Montfaucon, fare you well!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE BROTHER OF ST. MAGLOIRE.

As the exertion of power is for the most part pleasing, so the exercise of that which a woman possesses over a man is especially pleasant. When in addition a risk of no ordinary kind has been run, and the happy issue has been barely expected — above all when the momentary gain seems an augury of final victory—it is impossible that a feeling akin to exultation should not arise in the mind, however black the horizon, and however distant the fair haven.

The situation in which Count Hannibal left Mademoiselle de Vrillac will be remembered. She had prevailed on him; but in return he had bowed her to the earth, partly by subtle threats, and partly by sheer savagery. He had left her weeping, with the words "Madame de Tavannes" ringing doom in her ears, and the dark phantom of his will pointing onward to an inevitable future. Had she abandoned hope, it would have been natural.

But the girl was of a spirit not long nor easily cowed; and Tavannes had not left her half an hour before the reflection, that so far the honours of the day were hers, rose up to console her. In spite of his power and her impotence, she had imposed her will upon his; she had established an influence over him, she had discovered a scruple which stayed him, and a limit beyond which he would not pass. In the result

she might escape; for the conditions which he had accepted with an ill grace, might prove beyond his fulfilling. She might escape! True, many in her place would have feared a worse fate and harsher handling. But there lay half the merit of her victory. It had left her not only in a better position, but with a new confidence in her power over her adversary. He would insist on the bargain struck between them; within its four corners she could look for no indulgence. But if the conditions proved to be beyond his power, she believed that he would spare her: with an ill grace, indeed, with such ferocity and coarse reviling as her woman's pride might scarcely support. But he would spare her.

And if the worst befell her? She would still have the consolation of knowing that from the cataclysm which had overwhelmed her friends she had ransomed those most dear to her. Owing to the position of her chamber, she saw nothing of the excesses to which Paris gave itself up during the remainder of that day, and to which it returned with unabated zest on the following morning. But the Carlats and her women learned from the guards below what was passing; and quaking and cowering in their corners fixed frightened eyes on her, who was their stay and hope. How could she prove false to them? How doom them to perish, had there been no question of her lover?

Of him she sat thinking by the hour together. She recalled with solemn tenderness the moment in which he had devoted himself to the death which came but halfway to seize them; nor was she slow to forgive his subsequent withdrawal, and his attempt to rescue her in spite of herself. She found the impulse to die

glorious; the withdrawal—for the actor was her lover —a thing done for her, which he would not have done for himself, and which she quickly forgave him. The revulsion of feeling which had conquered her at the time, and led her to tear herself from him, no longer moved her much; while all in his action that might have seemed in other eyes less than heroic, all in his conduct—in a crisis demanding the highest — that smacked of common or mean, vanished, for she still clung to him. Clung to him, not so much with the passion of the mature woman, as with the maiden and sentimental affection of one who has now no hope of possessing, and for whom love no longer spells life but sacrifice.

She had leisure for these musings, for she was left to herself all that day, and until late on the following day. Her own servants waited on her, and it was known that below stairs Count Hannibal's riders kept sullen ward behind barred doors and shuttered windows, refusing admission to all who came. Now and again echoes of the riot which filled the streets with bloodshed reached her ears: or word of the more striking occurrences was brought to her by Madame Carlat. And early on this second day, Monday, it was whispered that M. de Tavannes had not returned, and that the men below were growing uneasy.

At last, when the suspense below and above was growing tense, it was broken. Footsteps and voices were heard ascending the stairs, the trampling and hubbub were followed by a heavy knock; perforce the door was opened. While Mademoiselle, who had risen, awaited with a beating heart she knew not what, a cowled father, in the dress of the monks of St. Magloire, stood on the threshold, and, crossing

himself, muttered the words of benediction. He entered slowly.

No sight could have been more dreadful to Mademoiselle; for it set at naught the conditions which she had so hardly exacted. What if Count Hannibal were behind, were even now mounting the stairs, prepared to force her to a marriage before this shaveling? Or ready to proceed, if she refused, to the last extremity? Sudden terror taking her by the throat choked her; her colour fled, her hand flew to her breast. Yet, before the door had closed on Bigot, she had recovered herself.

"This intrusion is not by M. de Tavannes' orders!" she cried, stepping forward haughtily. "This person has no business here. How dare you admit him?"

The Norman showed his bearded visage a moment at the door. "My lord's orders," he muttered sullenly. And he closed the door on them.

She had a Huguenot's hatred of a cowl; and, in this crisis, her reasons for fearing it. Her eyes blazed with indignation. "Enough!" she cried, pointing with a gesture of dismissal to the door. "Go back to him who sent you! If he will insult me, let him do it to my face! If he will perjure himself, let him forswear himself in person. Or, if you come on your own account," she continued, flinging prudence to the winds, "as your brethren came to Philippa de Luns, to offer me the choice you offered her, I give you her answer! If I had thought of myself only, I had not lived so long! And rather than bear your presence or hear your arguments——"

She came to a sudden, odd, quavering pause on the word; her lips remained parted, she swayed an instant on her feet. The next moment Madame Carlat,

to whom the visitor had turned his shoulder, doubted her eyes, for Mademoiselle was in the monk's arms!

"Clotilde! Clotilde!" he cried, and held her to him.

For the monk was M. de Tignonville! Under the cowl was the lover with whom Mademoiselle's thoughts had been engaged. In this disguise, and armed with Tavannes' note to Madame St. Lo—which the guards below knew for Count Hannibal's hand, though they were unable to decipher the contents—he had found no difficulty in making his way to her.

He had learned before he entered that Tavannes was abroad, and was aware therefore that he ran little risk. His betrothed, on the other hand, who knew nothing of his adventures in the interval, saw in him one who came to her at the greatest risk, across unnumbered perils, through streets swimming with blood. And though she had never embraced him save in the crisis of the massacre, though she had never called him by his Christian name, in the joy of this meeting she abandoned herself to him, she clung to him weeping, she forgot for the time his defection, and thought only of him who had returned to her so gallantly, who brought into the room a breath of Poitou, and the sea, and the old days, and the old life; and at the sight of whom the horrors of the last two days fell from her—for the moment.

And Madame Carlat wept also, and in the room was a sound of weeping. The least moved was, for a certainty, M. de Tignonville himself, who, as we know, had gone through much that day. But even his heart swelled, partly with pride, partly with thankfulness that he had returned to one who loved

him so well. Fate had been kinder to him than he deserved; but he need not confess that now. When he had brought off the *coup* which he had in his mind, he would hasten to forget that he had entertained other ideas.

Mademoiselle had been the first to be carried away; she was also the first to recover herself. "I had forgotten," she cried suddenly. "I had forgotten," and she wrested herself from his embrace with violence, and stood panting, her face white, her eyes affrighted. "I must not! And you—I had forgotten that too! To be here, monsieur, is the worst office you can do me. You must go! Go, monsieur, in mercy I beg of you, while it is possible. Every moment you are here, every moment you spend in this house, I shudder."

"You need not fear for me," he said, in a tone of bravado. He did not understand.

"I fear for myself!" she answered. And then, wringing her hands, divided between her love for him and her fear for herself, "Oh, forgive me!" she said. "You do not know that he has promised to spare me, if he cannot produce you, and—and—a minister! He has granted me that; but I thought when you entered that he had gone back on his word, and sent a priest, and it maddened me! I could not bear to think that I had gained nothing. Now you understand, and you will pardon me, monsieur? If he cannot produce you I am saved. Go then, leave me, I beg, without a moment's delay."

He laughed derisively as he turned back his cowl and squared his shoulders. "All that is over!" he said, "over and done with, sweet! M. de Tavannes is at this moment a prisoner in the Arsenal. On my

way hither I fell in with M. de Biron, and he told me. The Grand Master, who would have had me join his company, had been all night at Marshal Tavannes' hotel, where he had been detained longer than he expected. He stood pledged to release Count Hannibal on his return, but at my request he consented to hold him one hour, and to do also a little thing for me."

The glow of hope which had transfigured her face faded slowly. "It will not help," she said, "if he find you here."

"He will not! Nor you!"

"How, monsieur?"

"In a few minutes," he explained—he could not hide his exultation, "a message will come from the Arsenal in the name of Tavannes, bidding the monk he sent to you bring you to him. A spoken message, corroborated by my presence, should suffice: '*Bid the monk who is now with Mademoiselle,*' it will run, '*bring her to me at the Arsenal, and let four pikes guard them hither.*' When I begged M. de Biron to do this, he laughed. 'I can do better,' he said. 'They shall bring one of Count Hannibal's gloves, which he left on my table. Always supposing my rascals have done him no harm, which God forbid, for I am answerable.'"

Tignonville, delighted with the stratagem which the meeting with Biron had suggested, could see no flaw in it. She could, and though she heard him to the end, no second glow of hope softened the lines of her features. With a gesture full of dignity, which took in not only Madame Carlat and the waiting-woman who stood at the door but the absent servants, "And what of these?" she said. "What of these? You

forgot them, monsieur. You do not think, you cannot have thought, that I would abandon them? That I would leave them to such mercy as he, defeated, might extend to them? No, you forgot them."

He did not know what to answer, for the jealous eyes of the frightened waiting-woman, fierce with the fierceness of a hunted animal, were on him. The Carlat and she had heard, could hear. At last, "Better one than none!" he muttered, in a voice so low that if the servants caught his meaning it was but indistinctly. "I have to think of you."

"And I of them," she answered firmly. "Nor is that all. Were they not here, it could not be. My word is passed—though a moment ago, monsieur, in the joy of seeing you I forgot it. And how," she continued, "if I keep not my word, can I expect him to keep his? Or how, if I am ready to break the bond, on this happening which I never expected, can I hold him to conditions which he loves as little—as little as I love him?"

Her voice dropped piteously on the last words; her eyes, craving her lover's pardon, sought his. But rage, not pity or admiration, was the feeling roused in Tignonville's breast. He stood staring at her, struck dumb by folly so immense. At last, "You cannot mean this," he blurted out. "You cannot mean, Mademoiselle, that you intend to stand on that! To keep a promise wrung from you by force, by treachery, in the midst of such horrors as he and his have brought upon us! It is inconceivable!"

She shook her head. "I promised," she said.

"You were forced to it."

"But the promise saved our lives."

"From murderers! From assassins!" he protested.

She shook her head. "I cannot go back," she said firmly; "I cannot."

"Then you are willing to marry him," he cried in ignoble anger. "That is it! Nay, you must wish to marry him! For, as for his conditions, Mademoiselle," the young man continued, with an insulting laugh, "you cannot think seriously of them. *He* keep conditions and you in his power! He, Count Hannibal! But for the matter of that, and were he in the mind to keep them, what are they? There are plenty of ministers. I left one only this morning. I could lay my hand on one in five minutes. He has only to find one therefore—and to find me!"

"Yes, monsieur," she cried, trembling with wounded pride, "it is for that reason I implore you to go. The sooner you leave me, the sooner you place yourself in a position of security, the happier for me! Every moment that you spend here, you endanger both yourself and me!"

"If you will not be persuaded——"

"I shall not be persuaded," she answered firmly, "and you do but"—alas! her pride began to break down, her voice to quiver, she looked piteously at him—"by staying here make it harder for me to—to——"

"Hush!" cried Madame Carlat. "Hush!" And as they started and turned towards her—she was at the end of the chamber by the door, almost out of earshot—she raised a warning hand. "Listen!" she muttered, "some one has entered the house."

"'Tis my messenger from Biron," Tignonville answered sullenly. And he drew his cowl over his face, and, hiding his hands in his sleeves, moved towards the door. But on the threshold he turned and

held out his arms. He could not go thus. "Mademoiselle! Clotilde!" he cried with passion, "for the last time, listen to me, come with me. Be persuaded!"

"Hush!" Madame Carlat interposed again, and turned a scared face on them. "It is no messenger! It is Tavannes himself: I know his voice." And she wrung her hands. "*Oh, mon Dieu, mon Dieu,* what are we to do?" she continued, panic-stricken. And she looked all ways about the room.

CHAPTER XVI.

AT CLOSE QUARTERS.

FEAR leapt into Mademoiselle's eyes, but she commanded herself. She signed to Madame Carlat to be silent, and they listened, gazing at one another, hoping against hope that the woman was mistaken. A long moment they waited, and some were beginning to breathe again, when the strident tones of Count Hannibal's voice rolled up the staircase, and put an end to doubt. Mademoiselle grasped the table and stood supporting herself by it. "What are we to do?" she muttered. "What are we to do?" and she turned distractedly towards the women. The courage which had supported her in her lover's absence had abandoned her now. "If he finds him here I am lost! I am lost!"

"He will not know me," Tignonville muttered. But he spoke uncertainly; and his gaze, shifting hither and thither, belied the boldness of his words.

Madame Carlat's eyes flew round the room; on her for once the burden seemed to rest. Alas! the room had no second door, and the windows looked on a courtyard guarded by Tavannes' people. And even now Count Hannibal's step rang on the stair! his hand was almost on the latch. The woman wrung her hands; then, a thought striking her, she darted to a corner where Mademoiselle's robes hung on pegs against the wall.

"Here!" she cried, raising them. "Behind these! He may not be seen here! Quick, monsieur, quick! Hide yourself!"

It was a forlorn hope—the suggestion of one who had not thought out the position; and, whatever its promise, Mademoiselle's pride revolted against it.

"No," she cried. "Not there!" while Tignonville, who knew that the step was useless, since Count Hannibal must have learned that a monk had entered, held his ground.

"You could not deny yourself?" he muttered hurriedly.

"And a priest with me?" she answered; and she shook her head.

There was no time for more, and even as Mademoiselle spoke Count Hannibal's knuckles tapped the door. She cast a last look at her lover. He had turned his back on the window; the light no longer fell on his face. It was possible that he might pass unrecognised, if Tavannes' stay was brief; at any rate the risk must be run. In a half-stifled voice she bade her woman, Javette, open the door.

Count Hannibal bowed low as he entered; and he deceived the others. But he did not deceive her. He had not crossed the threshold before she repented that she had not acted on Tignonville's suggestion, and denied herself. For what could escape those hard keen eyes, which swept the room, saw all, and seemed to see nothing—those eyes in which there dwelt even now a glint of cruel humour? He might deceive others, but she who panted within his grasp, as the wild bird palpitates in the hand of the fowler, was not deceived! He saw, he knew! although, as

he bowed, and smiling, stood upright, he looked only at her.

"I expected to be with you before this," he said courteously, "but I have been detained. First, Mademoiselle, by some of your friends, who were reluctant to part with me; then by some of your enemies, who, finding me in no handsome case, took me for a Huguenot escaped from the river, and drove me to shifts to get clear of them. However, now I am come, I have news."

"News?" she muttered with dry lips. It could hardly be good news.

"Yes, Mademoiselle, of M. de Tignonville," he answered. "I have little doubt that I shall be able to produce him this evening, and so to satisfy one of your scruples. And as I trust that this good father," he went on, turning to the ecclesiastic, and speaking with the sneer from which he seldom refrained, Catholic as he was, when he mentioned a priest, "has by this time succeeded in removing the other, and persuading you to accept his ministrations——"

"No!" she cried impulsively.

"No?" with a dubious smile, and a glance from one to the other. "Oh, I had hoped better things. But he still may? He still may. I am sure he may. In which case, Mademoiselle, your modesty must pardon me if I plead urgency, and fix the hour after supper this evening for the fulfilment of your promise."

She turned white to the lips. "After supper?" she gasped.

"Yes, Mademoiselle, this evening. Shall I say—at eight o'clock?"

In horror of the thing which menaced her, of the thing from which only two hours separated her, she

could find no words but those which she had already used. The worst was upon her; worse than the worst could not befall her. "But he has not persuaded me!" she cried, clenching her hands in passion. "He has not persuaded me!"

"Still he may, Mademoiselle."

"He will not!" she cried wildly. "He will not!"

The room was going round with her. The precipice yawned at her feet; its naked terrors turned her brain. She had been pushed nearer, and nearer, and nearer; struggle as she might she was on the verge. A mist rose before her eyes, and though they thought she listened she understood nothing of what was passing. When she came to herself after the lapse of a minute, Count Hannibal was speaking.

"Permit him another trial," he was saying in a tone of bland irony. "A short time longer, Mademoiselle! One more assault, father! The weapons of the Church could not be better directed or to a more worthy object; and, successful, shall not fail of due recognition and an earthly reward."

And while she listened, half fainting, with a humming in her ears, he was gone. The door closed on him, and the three—Mademoiselle's woman had withdrawn when she opened to him—looked at one another. The girl parted her lips to speak, but she only smiled piteously; and it was M. de Tignonville who broke the silence, in a tone which betrayed rather relief than any other feeling.

"Come, all is not lost yet," he said briskly. "If I can escape from the house——"

"He knows you," she answered.

"What?"

"He knows you," Mademoiselle repeated in a tone

almost apathetic. "I read it in his eyes. He knew you at once: and knew, too," she added bitterly, "that he had here under his hand one of the two things he required."

"Then why did he hide his knowledge?" the young man retorted sharply.

"Why?" she answered. "To induce me to waive the other condition in the hope of saving you. Oh!" she continued in a tone of bitter raillery, "he has the cunning of hell, of the priests! You are no match for him, monsieur. Nor I; nor any of us. And"—with a gesture of despair—"he will be my master! He will break me to his will and to his hand! I shall be his! His, body and soul, body and soul!" she continued drearily, as she sank into a chair and, rocking herself to and fro, covered her face. "I shall be his! His till I die!"

The man's eyes burned, and the pulse in his temples beat wildly. "But you shall not," he exclaimed. "I may be no match for him in cunning, you say well. But I can kill him. And I will!" He paced up and down. "I will!"

"You should have done it when he was here," she answered, half in scorn, half in earnest.

"It is not too late," he cried; and then he stopped, silenced by the opening door. It was Javette who entered.

They looked at her, and before she spoke were on their feet. Her face, white and eager, marking something besides fear, announced that she brought news. She closed the door behind her, and in a moment it was told.

"Monsieur can escape, if he is quick," she cried in a low tone; and they saw that she trembled with ex-

citement. "They are at supper. But he must be quick! He must be quick!"

"Is not the door guarded?"

"It is, but——"

"And he knows! Your mistress says that he knows that I am here."

For a moment Javette looked startled. "It is possible," she muttered. "But he has gone out."

Madame Carlat clapped her hands. "I heard the door close," she said, "three minutes ago."

"And if monsieur can reach the room in which he supped last night, the window that was broken is only blocked"—she swallowed once or twice in her excitement—"with something he can move. And then monsieur is in the street, where his cowl will protect him."

"But Count Hannibal's men?" he asked eagerly.

"They are eating in the lodge by the door."

"Ha! And they cannot see the other room from there?"

Javette nodded. Her tale told, she seemed to be unable to add a word. Mademoiselle, who knew her for a craven, wondered that she had found courage either to note what she had or to bring the news. But as Providence had been so good to them as to put it into this woman's head to act as she had, it behoved them to use the opportunity—the last, the very last opportunity they might have.

She turned to Tignonville. "Oh, go!" she cried feverishly. "Go, I beg! Go now, monsieur! The greatest kindness you can do me is to place yourself as quickly as possible beyond his reach." A faint colour, the flush of hope, had returned to her cheeks. Her eyes glittered.

"Right, Mademoiselle!" he cried, obedient for once. "I go! And do you be of good courage." He held her hand an instant, then, moving to the door, he opened it and listened. They all pressed behind him to hear. A murmur of voices, low and distant, mounted the staircase and bore out the girl's tale; apart from this the house was silent. Tignonville cast a last look at Mademoiselle, and, with a gesture of farewell, glided a-tiptoe to the stairs and began to descend, his face hidden in his cowl. They watched him reach the angle of the staircase, they watched him vanish beyond it; and still they listened, looking at one another when a board creaked or the voices below were hushed for a moment.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DUEL.

At the foot of the staircase Tignonville paused. The droning Norman voices of the men on guard issued from an open door a few paces before him on the left. He caught a jest, the coarse chuckling laughter which attended it, and the gurgle of applause which followed; and he knew that at any moment one of the men might step out and discover him. Fortunately the door of the room with the shattered window was almost within reach of his hand on the right side of the passage, and he stepped softly to it. He stood an instant hesitating, his hand on the latch; then, alarmed by a movement in the guard-room, as if some were rising. he pushed the door in a panic, slid into the room, and shut the door behind him. He was safe, and he had made no noise; but at the table, at supper, with his back to him and his face to the partly closed window, sat Count Hannibal!

The young man's heart stood still. For a long minute he gazed at the Count's back, spellbound and unable to stir. Then, as Tavannes ate on without looking round, he began to take courage. Possibly he had entered so quietly that he had not been heard, or possibly his entrance was taken for that of a servant. In either case, there was a chance that he

might retire after the same fashion; and he had actually raised the latch, and was drawing the door to him with infinite precaution, when Tavannes' voice struck him, as it were, in the face.

"Pray do not admit the draught, M. de Tignonville," he said, without looking round. "In your cowl you do not feel it, but it is otherwise with me."

The unfortunate Tignonville stood transfixed, glaring at the back of the other's head. For an instant he could not find his voice. At last "Curse you!" he hissed in a transport of rage. "Curse you! You did know, then? And she was right."

"If you mean that I expected you, to be sure, monsieur," Count Hannibal answered. "See, your place is laid. You will not feel the air from without there. The very becoming dress which you have adopted secures you from cold. But—do you not find it somewhat oppressive this summer weather?"

"Curse you!" the young man cried, trembling.

Tavannes turned and looked at him with a dark smile. "The curse may fall," he said, "but I fancy it will not be in consequence of your petitions, monsieur. And now, were it not better you played the man?"

"If I were armed," the other cried passionately, "you would not insult me!"

"Sit down, sir, sit down," Count Hannibal answered sternly. "We will talk of that presently. In the meantime I have something to say to you. Will you not eat?"

But Tignonville would not.

"Very well," Count Hannibal answered; and he went on with his supper, "I am indifferent whether you eat or not. It is enough for me that you are one

of the two things I lacked an hour ago; and that I have you, M. de Tignonville. And through you I look to obtain the other."

"What other?" Tignonville cried.

"A minister," Tavannes answered, smiling. "A minister. There are not many left in Paris—of your faith. But you met one this morning, I know!"

"I? I met one?"

"Yes, monsieur, you! And can lay your hand on him in five minutes, you know."

M. de Tignonville gasped. His face turned a shade paler. "You have a spy," he cried. "You have a spy upstairs!"

Tavannes raised his cup to his lips, and drank. When he had set it down, "It may be," he said, and he shrugged his shoulders. "I know, it boots not how I know. It is my business to make the most of my knowledge—and of yours!"

M. de Tignonville laughed rudely. "Make the most of your own," he said; "you will have none of mine."

"That remains to be seen," Count Hannibal answered. "Carry your mind back two days, M. de Tignonville. Had I gone to Mademoiselle de Vrillac last Saturday and said to her 'Marry me, or promise to marry me,' what answer would she have given?"

"She would have called you an insolent!" the young man replied hotly. "And I——"

"No matter what you would have done!" Tavannes said. "Suffice it that she would have answered as you suggest. Yet to-day she has given me her promise."

"Yes," the young man retorted, "in circumstances in which no man of honour——"

"Let us say in peculiar circumstances."

"Well?"

"Which still exist! Mark me, M. de Tignonville," Count Hannibal continued, leaning forward and eyeing the young man with meaning, "*which still exist!* And may have the same effect on another's will as on hers! Listen! Do you hear?" And rising from his seat with a darkening face, he pointed to the partly shuttered window, through which the measured tramp of a body of men came heavily to the ear. "Do you hear, monsieur? Do you understand? As it was yesterday it is to-day! They killed the President La Place this morning! And they are searching! They are still searching! The river is not yet full, nor the gibbet glutted! I have but to open that window and denounce you, and your life would hang by no stronger thread than the life of a mad dog which they chase through the streets!"

The younger man had risen also. He stood confronting Tavannes, the cowl fallen back from his face, his eyes dilated. "You think to frighten me!" he cried. "You think that I am craven enough to sacrifice her to save myself. You——"

"You were craven enough to draw back yesterday, when you stood at this window and waited for death!" Count Hannibal answered brutally. "You flinched then, and may flinch again!"

"Try me!" Tignonville retorted, trembling with passion. "Try me!" And then, as the other stared at him and made no movement, "But you dare not!" he cried. "You dare not!"

"No?"

"No! For if I die you lose her!" Tignonville replied in a voice of triumph. "Ha, ha! I touch you

there!" he continued. "You dare not, for my safety is part of the price, and is more to you than it is to myself! You may threaten, M. de Tavannes, you may bluster, and shout and point to the window" —and he mocked, with a disdainful mimicry, the other's gesture—"but my safety is more to you than to me! And 'twill end there!"

"You believe that?"

"I know it!"

In two strides Count Hannibal was at the window. He seized a great piece of the boarding which closed one half of the opening; he wrenched it away. A flood of evening light burst in through the aperture, and fell on and heightened the flushed passion of his features, as he turned again to his opponent. "Then if you know it," he cried vehemently, "in God's name act upon it!" And he pointed to the window.

"Act upon it?"

"Ay, act upon it!" Tavannes repeated, with a glance of flame. "The road is open! If you would save your mistress, behold the way! If you would save her from the embrace she abhors, from the eyes under which she trembles, from the hand of a master, there lies the way! And it is not her glove only you will save, but herself, her soul, her body! So," he continued with a certain wildness and in a tone wherein contempt and bitterness were mingled, "to the lions, brave lover! Will you your life for her honour? Will you death that she may live a maid? Will you your head to save her finger? Then, leap down! leap down! The lists are open, the sand is strewed! Out of your own mouth I have it that if you perish she is saved! Then out, monsieur! Cry 'I am a Huguenot!' And God's will be done!"

Tignonville was livid. "Rather, your will!" he panted. "Your will, you devil! Nevertheless——"

"You will go! Ha! ha! You will go!"

For an instant it seemed that he would go. Stung by the challenge, wrought on by the contempt in which Tavannes held him, he shot a look of hate at the tempter; he caught his breath, and laid his hand on the edge of the shuttering as if he would leap out.

But it goes hard with him who has once turned back from the foe. The evening light, glancing cold on the burnished pike-points of a group of archers who stood near, caught his eye and went chill to his heart. Death, not in the arena, not in the sight of shouting thousands, but in this darkening street, with an enemy laughing from the window, death with no revenge to follow, with no certainty that after all she would be safe, such a death could be compassed only by pure love—the love of a child for a parent, of a parent for a child, of a man for the one woman in the world!

He recoiled. "You would not spare her!" he cried, his face damp with sweat—for he knew now that he would not go. "You want to be rid of me! You would fool me, and then——"

"Out of your own mouth you are convict!" Count Hannibal retorted gravely. "It was you who said it! But still I swear it! Shall I swear it to you?"

But Tignonville recoiled another step and was silent.

"No? O *preux chevalier*, O gallant knight! I knew it! Do you think that I did not know with whom I had to deal?" And Count Hannibal burst into harsh laughter, turning his back on the other, as if he no longer counted. "You will neither die

with her nor for her! You were better in her petticoats and she in your breeches! Or no, you are best as you are, good father! Take my advice, M. de Tignonville, have done with arms; and with a string of beads, and soft words, and talk of Holy Mother Church, you will fool the women as surely as the best of them! They are not all like my cousin, a flouting, gibing, jeering woman—you had poor fortune there, I fear?"

"If I had a sword!" Tignonville hissed, his face livid with rage. "You call me coward, because I will not die to please you. But give me a sword, and I will show you if I am a coward!"

Tavannes stood still. "You are there, are you?" he said in an altered tone. "I——"

"Give me a sword," Tignonville repeated, holding out his open trembling hands. "A sword! A sword! 'Tis easy taunting an unarmed man, but——"

"You wish to fight?"

"I ask no more! No more! Give me a sword," he urged, his voice quivering with eagerness. "It is you who are the coward!"

Count Hannibal stared at him. "And what am I to get by fighting you?" he reasoned slowly. "You are in my power. I can do with you as I please. I can call from this window and denounce you, or I can summon my men——"

"Coward! Coward!"

"Ay? Well, I will tell you what I will do," with a subtle smile. "I will give you a sword, M. de Tignonville, and I will meet you foot to foot here, in this room, on a condition."

"What is it? What is it?" the young man cried with incredible eagerness. "Name your condition!"

"That if I get the better of you, you find me a minister."

"I find you a——"

"A minister. Yes, that is it. Or tell me where I can find one."

The young man recoiled. "Never!" he said.

"You know where to find one."

"Never! Never!"

"You can lay your hand on one in five minutes, you know."

"I will not."

"Then I shall not fight you!" Count Hannibal answered coolly; and he turned from him, and back again. "You will pardon me if I say, M. de Tignonville, that you are in as many minds about fighting as about dying! I do not think that you would have made your fortune at Court. Moreover, there is a thing which I fancy you have not considered. If we fight you may kill me, in which case the condition will not help me much. Or I—which is more likely—" he added with a harsh smile, "may kill you, and again I am no better placed."

The young man's pallid features betrayed the conflict in his breast. To do him justice, his hand itched for the sword-hilt—he was brave enough for that; he hated, and only so could he avenge himself. But the penalty if he had the worse! And yet what of it? He was in hell now, in a hell of humiliation, shame, defeat, tormented by this fiend! 'Twas only to risk a lower hell.

At last, "I will do it!" he cried hoarsely. "Give me a sword and look to yourself."

"You promise?"

"Yes, yes, I promise!"

"Good," Count Hannibal answered suavely; "but we cannot fight so, we must have more light," and striding to the door he opened it, and calling the Norman bade him move the table and bring candles—a dozen candles; for in the narrow streets the light was waning, and in the half-shuttered room it was growing dusk. Tignonville, listening with a throbbing brain, wondered that the attendant expressed no surprise and said no word—until Tavannes added to his orders one for a pair of swords.

Then, "Monsieur's sword is here," Bigot answered in his half-intelligible patois. "He left it here yester morning."

"You are a good fellow, Bigot," Tavannes answered, with a gaiety and good-humour which astonished Tignonville. "And one of these days you shall marry Suzanne."

The Norman smiled sourly and went in search of the weapon.

"You have a poniard?" Count Hannibal continued in the same tone of unusual good temper, which had already struck Tignonville. "Excellent! Will you strip, then, or—as we are? Very good, monsieur; in the unlikely event of fortune declaring for you, you will be in a better condition to take care of yourself. A man running through the streets in his shirt is exposed to inconveniences!" And he laughed gaily.

While he laughed the other listened; and his rage began to give place to wonder. A man who regarded as a pastime a sword and dagger conflict between four walls, who, having his adversary in his power, was ready to discard the advantage, to descend into the lists, and to risk life for a whim, a fancy—such a man was outside his experience, though in Poitou in

those days of war were men reckoned brave. For what, he asked himself as he waited, had Tavannes to gain by fighting? The possession of Mademoiselle? But Mademoiselle, if his passion for her overwhelmed him, was in his power; and if his promise were a barrier—which seemed inconceivable in the light of his reputation—he had only to wait, and to-morrow, or the next day, or the next, a minister would be found, and without risk he could gain that for which he was now risking all.

Tignonville did not know that it was in the other's nature to find pleasure in such utmost ventures. Nevertheless the recklessness to which Tavannes' action bore witness had its effect upon him. By the time the young man's sword arrived something of his passion for the conflict had evaporated; and though the touch of the hilt restored his determination, the locked door, the confined space, and the unaccustomed light went a certain distance towards substituting despair for courage.

The use of the dagger in the duels of that day, however, rendered despair itself formidable. And Tignonville, when he took his place, appeared anything but a mean antagonist. He had removed his robe and cowl, and lithe and active as a cat he stood as it were on springs, throwing his weight now on this foot and now on that, and was continually in motion. The table bearing the candles had been pushed against the window, the boarding of which had been replaced by Bigot before he left the room. Tignonville had this, and consequently the lights, on his dagger hand; and he plumed himself on the advantage, considering his point the more difficult to follow.

Count Hannibal did not seem to notice this, however. "Are you ready?" he asked. And then,

"On guard!" he cried, and he stamped the echo to the word. But, that done, instead of bearing the other down with a headlong rush characteristic of the man—as Tignonville feared—he held off warily, stooping low; and when his slow opening was met by one as cautious, he began to taunt his antagonist.

"Come!" he cried, and feinted half-heartedly. "Come, monsieur, are we going to fight, or play at fighting?"

"Fight yourself, then!" Tignonville answered, his breath quickened by excitement and growing hope. "'Tis not I hold back!" And he lunged, but was put aside.

"Ça! ça!" Tavannes retorted; and he lunged and parried in his turn, but loosely and at a distance. After which the two moved nearer the door, their eyes glittering as they watched one another, their knees bent, the sinews of their backs straining for the leap. Suddenly Tavannes thrust, and leapt away, and as his antagonist thrust in return the Count swept the blade aside with a strong parry, and for a moment seemed to be on the point of falling on Tignonville with the poniard. But Tignonville retired his right foot nimbly, which brought them front to front again. And the younger man laughed.

"Try again, M. le Comte!" he said. And, with the word, he dashed in himself quick as light; for a second the blades ground on one another, the daggers hovered, the two suffused faces glared into one another; then the pair disengaged again. The blood trickled from a scratch on Count Hannibal's neck; half an inch to the right and the point had found his throat.

And Tignonville, elated, laughed anew, and swaying from side to side on his hips, watched with growing confidence for a second chance. Lithe as one of the leopards Charles kept at the Louvre, he stooped lower and lower, and more and more with each moment took the attitude of the assailant, watching for an opening; while Count Hannibal, his face dark and his eyes vigilant, stood increasingly on the defence. The light was waning a little, the wicks of the candles were burning long; but neither noticed it or dared to remove his eyes from the other's. Their laboured breathing found an echo on the farther side of the door, but this again neither observed.

"Well?" Count Hannibal said at last. "Are you coming?"

"When I please," Tignonville answered; and he feinted but drew back. The other did the same, and again they watched one another, their eyes seeming to grow smaller and smaller. Gradually a smile had birth on Tignonville's lips. He thrust! It was parried! He thrust again—parried! Tavannes, grown still more cautious, gave a yard. Tignonville pushed on, but did not allow confidence to master caution. He began, indeed, to taunt his adversary; to flout and jeer him. But it was with a motive.

For suddenly, in the middle of a sentence, he repeated the peculiar thrust which had been successful before. This time, however, Tavannes was ready. He put aside the blade with a quick parade, and instead of making a riposte sprang within the other's guard. The two came face to face and breast to shoulder, and struck furiously with their daggers. Count Hannibal was outside his opponent's sword and had the advantage. Tignonville's dagger fell,

but glanced off the metalwork of the other's hilt; Tavannes' fell swift and hard between the young man's eyes. The Huguenot flung up his hands and staggered back, falling his length on the floor.

In an instant Count Hannibal was on his breast, and had knocked away his dagger. Then, "You own yourself vanquished?" he cried.

The young man, blinded by the blood which trickled down his face, made a sign with his hands. Count Hannibal rose to his feet again, and stood a moment looking at his foe without speaking. Presently he seemed to be satisfied. He nodded, and going to the table dipped a napkin in water. He brought it, and carefully supporting Tignonville's head, laved his brow. "It is as I thought," he said, when he had stanched the blood. "You are not hurt, man. You are stunned. It is no more than a bruise."

The young man was coming to himself. "But I thought——" he muttered, and broke off to pass his hand over his face. Then he got up slowly, reeling a little, "I thought it was the point," he muttered.

"No, it was the pommel," Tavannes answered drily. "It would not have served me to kill you. I could have done that ten times."

Tignonville groaned, and, sitting down at the table, held the napkin to his aching head. One of the candles had been overturned in the struggle and lay on the floor, flaring in a little pool of grease. Tavannes set his heel upon it; then, striding to the farther end of the room, he picked up Tignonville's dagger and placed it beside his sword on the table. He looked about to see if aught else remained to do, and, finding nothing, he returned to Tignonville's side.

"Now, monsieur," he said in a voice hard and constrained, "I must ask you to perform your part of the bargain."

A groan of anguish broke from the unhappy man. And yet he had set his life on the cast; what more could he have done? "You will not harm him?" he muttered.

"He shall go safe," Count Hannibal replied gravely.

"And——" he fought a moment with his pride, then blurted out the words, "you will not tell her—that it was through me—you found him?"

"I will not," Tavannes answered in the same tone. He stooped and picked up the other's robe and cowl, which had fallen from a chair—so that as he spoke his eyes were averted. "She shall never know through me," he said.

And Tignonville, his face hidden in his hands, told him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ANDROMEDA, PERSEUS BEING ABSENT.

LITTLE by little—while they fought below—the gloom had thickened, and night had fallen in the room above. But Mademoiselle would not have candles brought. Seated in the darkness, on the uppermost step of the stairs, her hands clasped about her knees, she listened and listened, as if by that action she could avert misfortune; or as if, by going so far forward to meet it, she could turn aside the worst. The women shivering in the darkness about her would fain have struck a light and drawn her back into the room, for they felt safer there. But she was not to be moved. The laughter and chatter of the men in the guard-room, the coming and going of Bigot as he passed, below but out of sight, had no terrors for her; nay, she breathed more freely on the bare open landing of the staircase than in the close confines of a room which her fears made hateful to her. Here at least she could listen, her face unseen; and listening she bore the suspense more easily.

A turn in the staircase, with the noise which proceeded from the guard-room, rendered it difficult to hear what happened in the closed room below. But she thought that if an alarm were raised there she must hear it; and as the moments passed and nothing happened, she began to feel confident that her lover had made good his escape by the window.

Presently she got a fright. Three or four men came from the guard-room and went, as it seemed to her, to the door of the room with the shattered casement. She told herself that she had rejoiced too soon, and her heart stood still. She waited for a rush of feet, a cry, a struggle. But except an uncertain muffled sound which lasted for some minutes, and was followed by a dull shock, she heard nothing more. And presently the men went back whispering, the noise in the guard-room which had been partially hushed broke forth anew, and perplexed but relieved she breathed again. Surely he had escaped by this time. Surely by this time he was far away, in the Arsenal, or in some place of refuge! And she might take courage, and feel that for this day the peril was overpast.

"Mademoiselle will have the lights now?" one of the women ventured.

"No! no!" she answered feverishly, and she continued to crouch where she was on the stairs, bathing herself and her burning face in the darkness and coolness of the stairway. The air entered freely through a window at her elbow and the place was fresher, were that all, than the room she had left. Javette began to whimper, but she paid no heed to her; a man came and went along the passage below, and she heard the outer door unbarred, and the jarring tread of three or four men who passed through it. But all without disturbance; and afterwards the house was quiet again. And as on this Monday evening the prime virulence of the massacre had begun to abate —though it held after a fashion to the end of the week—Paris without was quiet also. The sounds which had chilled her heart at intervals during two

days were no longer heard. A feeling almost of peace, almost of comfort—a drowsy feeling, that was three parts a reaction from excitement—took possession of her. In the darkness her head sank lower and lower on her knees. And half an hour passed, while Javette whimpered, and Madame Carlat slumbered, her broad back propped against the wall.

Suddenly Mademoiselle opened her eyes, and saw, three steps below her, a strange man whose upward way she barred. Behind him came Carlat, and behind him Bigot, lighting both; and in the confusion of her thoughts as she rose to her feet the three, all staring at her in a common amazement, seemed a company. The air entering through the open window beside her blew the flame of the candle this way and that, and added to the nightmare character of the scene; for by the shifting light the men seemed to laugh one moment and scowl the next, and their shadows were now high and now low on the wall. In truth they were as much amazed at coming on her in that place as she at their appearance; but they were awake, and she newly roused from sleep; and the advantage was with them.

"What is it?" she cried in a panic. "What is it?"

"If Mademoiselle will return to her room?" one of the men said courteously.

"But—what is it?" She was frightened.

"If Mademoiselle——"

Then she turned without more and went back into the room, and the three followed, and her woman and Madame Carlat. She stood resting one hand on the table while Javette with shaking fingers lighted the candles. Then, "Now, monsieur," she said in a hard voice, "if you will tell me your business?"

"You do not know me?" The stranger's eyes dwelt kindly and pitifully on her.

She looked at him steadily, crushing down the fears which knocked at her heart. "No," she said. "And yet I think I have seen you."

"You saw me a week last Sunday," the stranger answered sorrowfully. "My name is La Tribe. I preached that day, Mademoiselle, before the King of Navarre. I believe that you were there."

For a moment she stared at him in silence, her lips parted. Then she laughed, a laugh which set the teeth on edge. "Oh, he is clever!" she cried. "He has the wit of the priests! Or the devil! But you come too late, monsieur! You come too late! The bird has flown."

"Mademoiselle——"

"I tell you the bird has flown!" she repeated vehemently. And her laugh of joyless triumph rang through the room. "He is clever, but I have outwitted him! I have——"

She paused and stared about her wildly, struck by the silence; struck, too, by something solemn, something pitiful in the faces that were turned on her. And her lip began to quiver. "What?" she muttered. "Why do you look at me so? He has not" —she turned from one to another—"he has not been taken?"

"M. Tignonville?"

She nodded.

"He is below."

"Ah!" she said.

They expected to see her break down, perhaps to see her fall. But she only groped blindly for a chair and sat. And for a moment there was silence in the

room. It was the Huguenot minister who broke it in a tone formal and solemn.

"Listen, all present!" he said slowly. "The ways of God are past finding out. For two days in the midst of great perils I have been preserved by His hand and fed by His bounty, and I am told that I shall live if, in this matter, I do the will of those who hold me in their power. But be assured—and hearken all," he continued, lowering his voice to a sterner note. "Rather than marry this woman to this man against her will—if indeed in His sight such marriage can be—rather than save my life by such base compliance, I will die not once but ten times! See. I am ready! I will make no defence!" And he opened his arms as if to welcome the stroke. "If there be trickery here, if there has been practising below, where they told me this and that, it shall not avail! Until I hear from Mademoiselle's own lips that she is willing, I will not say over her so much as Yea, yea, or Nay, nay!"

"She is willing!"

La Tribe turned sharply, and beheld the speaker. It was Count Hannibal, who had entered a few seconds earlier, and had taken his stand within the door.

"She is willing!" Tavannes repeated quietly. And if, in this moment of the fruition of his schemes, he felt his triumph, he masked it under a face of sombre purpose. "Do you doubt me, man?"

"From her own lips!" the other replied, undaunted —and few could say as much—by that harsh presence. "From no other's!"

"Sirrah, you——"

"I can die. And you can no more, my lord!" the

minister answered bravely. "You have no threat can move me."

"I am not sure of that," Tavannes answered, more blandly. "But had you listened to me and been less anxious to be brave, M. La Tribe, where no danger is, you had learned that here is no call for heroics! Mademoiselle is willing, and will tell you so."

"With her own lips?"

Count Hannibal raised his eyebrows. "With her own lips, if you will," he said. And then, advancing a step and addressing her, with unusual gravity, "Mademoiselle de Vrillac," he said, "you hear what this gentleman requires. Will you be pleased to confirm what I have said?"

She did not answer, and in the intense silence which held the room in its freezing grasp a woman choked, another broke into weeping. The colour ebbed from the cheeks of more than one; the men fidgeted on their feet.

Count Hannibal looked round, his head high. "There is no call for tears," he said; and whether he spoke in irony or in a strange obtuseness was known only to himself. "Mademoiselle is in no hurry—and rightly—to answer a question so momentous. Under the pressure of utmost peril, she passed her word; the more reason that, now the time has come to redeem it, she should do so at leisure and after thought. Since she gave her promise, monsieur, she has had more than one opportunity of evading its fulfilment. But she is a Vrillac, and I know that nothing is farther from her thoughts."

He was silent a moment; and then "Mademoiselle," he said, "I would not hurry you."

Her eyes were closed, but at that her lips moved.

"I am—willing," she whispered. And a fluttering sigh, of relief, of pity, of God knows what, filled the room.

"You are satisfied, M. La Tribe?"

"I do not——"

"Man!" With a growl as of a tiger, Count Hannibal dropped the mask. In two strides he was at the minister's side, his hand gripped his shoulder; his face, flushed with passion, glared into his. "Will you play with lives?" he hissed. "If you do not value your own, have you no thought of others? Of these? Look and count! Have you no bowels? If she will save them, will not you?"

"My own I do not value."

"Curse your own!" Tavannes cried in furious scorn. And he shook the other to and fro. "Who thought of your life? Will you doom these? Will you give them to the butcher?"

"My lord," La Tribe answered, shaken in spite of himself, "if she be willing——"

"She is willing."

"I have nought to say. But I caught her words indistinctly. And without her consent——"

"She shall speak more plainly. Mademoiselle——"

She anticipated him. She had risen, and stood looking straight before her, seeing nothing. "I am willing," she muttered with a strange gesture, "if it must be."

He did not answer.

"If it must be," she repeated slowly, and with a heavy sigh. And her chin dropped on her breast. Then, abruptly, suddenly—it was a strange thing to see—she looked up. A change as complete as the change which had come over Count Hannibal a min-

ute before came over her. She sprang to his side; she clutched his arm and devoured his face with her eyes. "You are not deceiving me?" she cried. "You have Tignonville below? You—oh, no, no!" And she fell back from him, her eyes distended, her voice grown suddenly shrill and defiant, "You have not! You are deceiving me! He has escaped, and you have lied to me!"

"I?"

"Yes, you have lied to me!" It was the last fierce flicker of hope when hope seemed dead: the last clutch of the drowning at the straw that floated before the eyes.

He laughed harshly. "You will be my wife in five minutes," he said, "and you give me the lie? A week, and you will know me better! A month, and —but we will talk of that another time. For the present," he continued, turning to La Tribe, "do you, sir, tell her that the gentleman is below. Perhaps she will believe you. For you know him."

La Tribe looked at her sorrowfully; his heart bled for her. "I have seen M. de Tignonville," he said. "And M. le Comte says truly. He is in the same case with ourselves, a prisoner."

"You have seen him?" she wailed.

"I left him in the room below, when I mounted the stairs."

Count Hannibal laughed, the grim mocking laugh which seemed to revel in the pain it inflicted. "Will you have him for a witness?" he cried. "There could not be a better, for he will not forget. Shall I fetch him?"

She bowed her head, shivering. "Spare me that," she said. And she pressed her hands to her eyes

while an uncontrollable shudder passed over her frame. Then she stepped forward: "I am ready," she whispered. "Do with me as you will!"

. . . . . .

When they had all gone out and closed the door behind them, and the two whom the minister had joined were left together, Count Hannibal continued for a time to pace the room, his hands clasped at his back, and his head sunk somewhat on his chest. His thoughts appeared to run in a new channel, and one, strange to say, widely diverted from his bride and from that which he had just done. For he did not look her way, or, for a time, speak to her. He stood once to snuff a candle, doing it with an absent face; and once to look, but still absently, as if he read no word of it, at the marriage writing which lay, the ink still wet, upon the table. After each of these interruptions he resumed his steady pacing to and fro, to and fro, nor did his eye wander once in the direction of her chair.

And she waited. The conflict of emotions, the strife between hope and fear, the final defeat had stunned her; had left her exhausted, almost apathetic. Yet not quite, nor wholly. For when in his walk he came a little nearer to her, a chill perspiration broke out on her brow, and shudderings crept over her; and when he passed farther from her—and then only, it seemed—she breathed again. But the change lay beneath the surface, and cheated the eye. Into her attitude, as she sat, her hands clasped on her lap, her eyes fixed, came no apparent change or shadow of movement.

Suddenly, with a dull shock, she became aware that he was speaking.

"There was need of haste," he said, his tone strangely low and free from emotion, "for I am under bond to leave Paris to-morrow for Angers, whither I bear letters from the King. And as matters stood, there was no one with whom I could leave you. I trust Bigot; he is faithful, and you may trust him, Madame, fair or foul! But he is not quick-witted. Badelon also you may trust. Bear it in mind. Your woman Javette is not faithful; but as her life is guaranteed she must stay with us until she can be securely placed. Indeed, I must take all with me—with one exception—for the priests and monks rule Paris, and they do not love me, nor would spare aught at my word."

He was silent a few moments. Then he resumed in the same tone, "You ought to know how we, Tavannes, stand. It is by Monsieur and the Queen-Mother; and *contra* the Guises. We have all been in this matter; but the latter push and we are pushed, and the old crack will reopen. As it is, I cannot answer for much beyond the reach of my arm. Therefore, we take all with us except M. Tignonville, who desires to be conducted to the Arsenal."

She had begun to listen with averted eyes. But as he continued to speak surprise awoke in her, and something stronger than surprise—amazement, stupefaction. Slowly her eyes came to him, and when he ceased to speak, "Why do you tell me these things?" she muttered, her dry lips framing the words with difficulty.

"Because it behoves you to know them," he answered, thoughtfully tapping the table. "I have no one, save my brother, whom I can trust."

She would not ask him why he trusted her, nor why

he thought he could trust her. For a moment or two she watched him, while he, with his eyes lowered, stood in deep thought. At last he looked up and his eyes met hers. "Come!" he said abruptly and in a different tone, "we must end this! Is it to be a kiss or a blow between us?"

She rose, though her knees shook under her; and they stood face to face, her face white as paper. "What—do you mean?" she whispered.

"Is it to be a kiss or a blow?" he repeated. "A husband must be a lover, Madame, or a master, or both! I am content to be the one or the other, or both, as it shall please you. But the one I will be."

"Then, a thousand times, a blow," she cried, her eyes flaming, "from you!"

He wondered at her courage, but he hid his wonder. "So be it!" he answered. And before she knew what he would be at, he struck her sharply across the cheek with the glove which he held in his hand. She recoiled with a low cry, and her cheek blazed scarlet where he had struck it. "So be it!" he continued sombrely. "The choice shall be yours, but you will come to me daily for the one or the other. If I cannot be lover, Madame, I will be master. And by this sign I will have you know it, daily, and daily remember it."

She stared at him, her bosom rising and falling, in an astonishment too deep for words. But he did not heed her. He did not look at her again. He had already turned to the door, and while she looked he passed through it, he closed it behind him. And she was alone.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE ORLÉANNAIS.

"BUT you fear him?"

"Fear him?" Madame St. Lo answered; and, to the surprise of the Countess, she made a little face of contempt. "No; why should I fear him? I fear him no more than the puppy leaping at old Sancho's bridle fears his tall playfellow! Or than the cloud you see above us fears the wind before which it flies!" She pointed to a white patch, the size of a man's hand, which hung above the hill on their left hand and formed the only speck in the blue summer sky. "Fear him? Not I!" And, laughing gaily, she put her horse at a narrow rivulet which crossed the grassy track on which they rode.

"But he is hard?" the Countess murmured in a low voice, as she regained her companion's side.

"Hard?" Madame St. Lo rejoined with a gesture of pride. "Ay, hard as the stones in my jewelled ring! Hard as flint, or the nether millstone—to his enemies! But to women? Bah! Who ever heard that he hurt a woman?"

"Why then is he so feared?" the Countess asked, her eyes on the subject of their discussion; a solitary figure, riding some fifty paces in front of them.

"Because he counts no cost!" her companion answered. "Because he killed Savillon in the court of the Louvre, though he knew his life the forfeit. He

would have paid the forfeit too, or lost his right hand, if Monsieur, for his brother the Marshal's sake, had not intervened. But Savillon had whipped his dog, you see. Then he killed the Chevalier de Millaud, but 'twas in fair fight, in the snow, in their shirts. For that, Millaud's son lay in wait for him with two, in the passage under the Châtelet; but Hannibal wounded one, and the others saved themselves. Undoubtedly he is feared!" she added with the same note of pride in her voice.

The two, who talked, rode at the rear of the little company which had left Paris at daybreak two days before, by the Porte St. Jacques. Moving steadily south-westward by the lesser roads and bridle-tracks —for Count Hannibal seemed averse from the great road—they had lain the second night in a village three leagues from Bonneval. A journey of two days on fresh horses is apt to change scenery and eye alike; but seldom has an alteration—in themselves and all about them—as great as that which blessed this little company, been wrought in so short a time. From the stifling wynds and evil-smelling lanes of Paris, they had passed to the green uplands, the breezy woods and babbling streams of the upper Orléannais; from sights and sounds the most appalling, to the solitude of the sandy heath, haunt of the great bustard, or the sunshine of the hillside, vibrating with the songs of larks; from an atmosphere of terror and gloom to the freedom of God's earth and sky. Numerous enough—they numbered a score of armed men—to defy the lawless bands which had their lairs in the huge forest of Orleans, they halted where they pleased: at mid-day under a grove of chestnut-trees, or among the willows beside a brook; at night, if

they willed it, under God's heaven. Far, not only from Paris, but from the great road, with its gibbets and pillories—the great road which at that date ran through a waste, no peasant living willingly within sight of it—they rode in the morning and in the evening, resting in the heat of the day. And though they had left Paris with much talk of haste, they rode more at leisure with every league.

For whatever Tavannes' motive, it was plain that he was in no hurry to reach his destination. Nor for that matter were any of his company. Madame St. Lo, who had seized the opportunity of escaping from the capital under her cousin's escort, was in an ill-humour with cities, and declaimed much on the joys of a cell in the woods. For the time the coarsest nature and the dullest rider had had enough of alarums and conflicts.

The whole company, indeed, though it moved in some fashion of array with an avant and a rear-guard, the ladies riding together, and Count Hannibal proceeding solitary in the midst, formed as peaceful a band, and one as innocently diverted, as if no man of them had ever grasped pike or blown a match. There was an old rider among them who had seen the sack of Rome, and the dead face of the great Constable, the idol of the Free Companies. But he had a taste for simples and much skill in them; and when Madame had once seen Badelon on his knees in the grass searching for plants, she lost her fear of him. Bigot, with his low brow and matted hair, was the abject slave of Suzanne, Madame St. Lo's woman, who twitted him mercilessly on his Norman *patois*, and poured the vials of her scorn on him a dozen times a day. In all, with La Tribe and the Carlats,

Madame St. Lo's servants, and the Countess's following, they numbered not far short of two score; and when they halted at noon, and under the shadow of some leafy tree, ate their mid-day meal, or drowsed to the tinkle of Madame St. Lo's lute, it was difficult to believe that Paris existed, or that these same people had so lately left its blood-stained pavements.

They halted this morning a little earlier than usual. Madame St. Lo had barely answered her companion's question before the subject of their discussion swung himself from old Sancho's back, and stood waiting to assist them to dismount. Behind him, where the green valley through which the road passed narrowed to a rocky gate, an old mill stood among willows at the foot of a mound. On the mound behind it a ruined castle which had stood siege in the Hundred Years' War raised its grey walls; and beyond this the stream which turned the mill poured over rocks with a cool rushing sound that proved irresistible. The men, their horses watered and hobbled, went off, shouting like boys, to bathe below the falls; and after a moment's hesitation Count Hannibal rose from the grass on which he had flung himself.

"Guard that for me, Madame," he said. And he dropped a packet, bravely sealed and tied with a silk thread, into the Countess's lap. "'Twill be safer than leaving it in my clothes. Ohé!" And he turned to Madame St. Lo. "Would you fancy a life that was all gipsying, cousin?" And if there was irony in his voice, there was desire in his eyes.

"There is only one happy man in the world," she answered, with conviction.

"By name?"

"The hermit of Compiégne."

"And in a week you would be wild for a masque!" he said cynically. And turning on his heel he followed the men.

Madame St. Lo sighed complacently. "Heigho!" she said. "He's right! We are never content, *ma mie!* When I am trifling in the Gallery my heart is in the greenwood. And when I have eaten black bread and drunk spring water for a fortnight I do nothing but dream of Zamet's, and white mulberry tarts! And you are in the same case. You have saved your round white neck, or it has been saved for you, by not so much as the thickness of Zamet's pie-crust—I declare my mouth is beginning to water for it!—and instead of being thankful and making the best of things, you are thinking of poor Madame d'Yverne, or dreaming of your calf-love!"

The girl's face—for a girl she was, though they called her Madame—began to work. She struggled a moment with her emotion, and then broke down, and fell to weeping silently. For two days she had sat in public and not given way. But the reference to her lover was too much for her strength.

Madame St. Lo looked at her with eyes which were not unkindly. "Sits the wind in that quarter?" she murmured. "I thought so! But there, my dear, if you don't put that packet in your gown you'll wash out the address! Moreover, if you ask me, I don't think the young man is worth it. It is only that which we have not got—we want!"

But the young Countess had borne to the limit of her powers. With an incoherent word she rose to her feet, and walked hurriedly away. The thought of what was and of what might have been, the thought of the lover who still—though he no longer

seemed, even to her, the perfect hero—held a place in her heart, filled her breast to overflowing. She longed for some spot where she could weep unseen, where the sunshine and the blue sky would not mock her grief; and seeing in front of her a little clump of alders, which grew beside the stream, in a bend that in winter was marshy, she hastened towards it.

Madame St. Lo saw her figure blend with the shadow of the trees—"Quite *à la* Ronsard, I give my word!" she murmured. "And now she is out of sight! *La, la!* I could play at the game myself, and carve sweet sorrow on the barks of trees, if it were not so lonesome! And if I had a man!"

And gazing pensively at the stream and the willows, my lady tried to work herself into a proper frame of mind; now murmuring the name of one gallant, and now, finding it unsuited, the name of another. But the soft inflection would break into a giggle, and finally into a yawn; and, tired of the attempt, she began to pluck grass and throw it from her. By-and-by she discovered that Madame Carlat and the women, who had their place a little apart, had disappeared; and affrighted by the solitude and silence—for neither of which she was made—she sprang up and stared about her, hoping to discern them. Right and left, however, the sweep of hillside curved upward to the skyline, lonely and untenanted; behind her the castled rock frowned down on the rugged gorge and filled it with dispiriting shadow. Madame St. Lo stamped her foot on the turf.

"The little fool!" she murmured, pettishly. "Does she think that I am to be murdered that she may fatten on sighs? Oh, come up, Madame, you must be dragged out of this!" And she started briskly to-

wards the alders, intent on gaining company as quickly as possible.

She had gone about fifty yards, and had as many more to traverse when she halted. A man, bent double, was moving stealthily along the farther side of the brook a little in front of him. Now she saw him, now she lost him; now she caught a glimpse of him again, through a screen of willow branches. He moved with the utmost caution, as a man moves who is pursued or in danger; and for a moment she deemed him a peasant whom the bathers had disturbed and who was bent on escaping. But when he came opposite to the alder-bed she saw that that was his point, for he crouched down, sheltered by a willow, and gazed eagerly among the trees, always with his back to her; and then he waved his hand to someone in the wood.

Madame St. Lo drew in her breath. As if he had heard the sound—which was impossible—the man dropped down where he stood, crawled a yard or two on his face, and disappeared.

Madame stared a moment, expecting to see him or hear him. Then, as nothing happened, she screamed. She was a woman of quick impulses, essentially feminine; and she screamed three or four times, standing where she was, her eyes on the edge of the wood. "If that does not bring her out, nothing will!" she thought.

It brought her. An instant, and the Countess appeared, and hurried in dismay to her side. "What is it?" the younger woman asked, glancing over her shoulder; for all the valley, all the hills were peaceful, and behind Madame St. Lo—but the lady had not discovered it—the servants who had re-

turned were laying the meal. "What is it?" she repeated anxiously.

"Who was it?" Madame St. Lo asked curtly. She was quite calm now.

"Who was—who?"

"The man in the wood?"

The Countess stared a moment, then laughed. "Only the old soldier they call Badelon, gathering simples. Did you think that he would harm me?"

"It was not old Badelon whom I saw!" Madame St. Lo retorted. "It was a younger man, who crept along the other side of the brook, keeping under cover. When I first saw him he was there," she continued, pointing to the place. "And he crept on and on until he came opposite to you. Then he waved his hand."

"To me?"

Madame nodded.

"But if you saw him, who was he?" the Countess asked.

"I did not see his face," Madame St. Lo answered. "But he waved to you. That I saw."

The Countess had a thought which slowly flooded her face with crimson. Madame St. Lo saw the change, saw the tender light which on a sudden softened the other's eyes; and the same thought occurred to her. And having a mind to punish her companion for her reticence—for she did not doubt that the girl knew more than she acknowledged—she proposed that they should return and find Badelon, and learn if he had seen the man.

"Why?" Madame Tavannes asked. And she stood stubbornly, her head high. "Why should we?"

"To clear it up," the elder woman answered mis-

chievously. "But perhaps, it were better to tell your husband and let his men search the coppice."

The colour left the Countess's face as quickly as it had come. For a moment she was tongue-tied. Then, "Have we not had enough of seeking and being sought?" she cried; more bitterly than befitted the occasion. "Why should we hunt him? I am not timid, and he did me no harm. I beg, Madame, that you will do me the favour of being silent on the matter."

"Oh, if you insist? But what a pother——"

"I did not see him, and he did not see me," Madame de Tavannes answered vehemently. "I fail, therefore, to understand why we should harass him, whoever he be. Besides, M. de Tavannes is waiting for us."

"And M. de Tignonville—is following us!" Madame St. Lo muttered—under her breath. And she made a face at the other's back.

She was silent, however; they returned to the others; and nothing of import, it would seem, had happened. The soft summer air played on the meal laid under the willows as it had played on the meal of yesterday laid under the chestnut-trees. The horses grazed within sight, moving now and again, with a jingle of trappings or a jealous neigh; the women's chatter vied with the unceasing sound of the mill-stream. After dinner, Madame St. Lo touched the lute, and Badelon—Badelon who had seen the sack of the Colonna's Palace, and been served by cardinals on the knee—fed a water-rat, which had its home in one of the willow-stumps, with carrot-parings. One by one the men laid themselves to sleep with their faces on their arms; and to the eyes all

was as all had been yesterday in this camp of armed men living peacefully.

But not to the Countess! She had accepted her life, she had resigned herself, she had marvelled that it was no worse. After the horrors of Paris the calm of the last two days had fallen on her as balm on a wound. Worn out in body and mind, she had rested, and only rested; without thought, almost without emotion, save for the feeling, half fear, half curiosity, which stirred her in regard to the strange man, her husband. Who on his side left her alone.

But the last hour had wrought a change. Her eyes were grown restless, her colour came and went. The past stirred in its shallow—ah, so shallow—grave; and dead hopes and dead forebodings, strive as she might, thrust out hands to plague and torment her. If the man who sought to speak with her by stealth, who dogged her footsteps and hung on the skirts of her party, were Tignonville—her lover, who at his own request had been escorted to the Arsenal before their departure from Paris—then her plight was a sorry one. For what woman, wedded as she had been wedded, could think otherwise than indulgently of his persistence? And yet, lover and husband! What peril, what shame the words had often spelled! At the thought only she trembled and her colour ebbed. She saw, as one who stands on the brink of a precipice, the depth which yawned before her. She asked herself, shivering, if she would ever sink to *that*.

All the loyalty of a strong nature, all the virtue of a good woman revolted against the thought. True, her husband—husband she must call him—had not deserved her love; but his bizarre magnanimity, the

gloomy, disdainful kindness with which he had crowned possession, even the unity of their interests, which he had impressed upon her in so strange a fashion, claimed a return in honour.

To be paid—how? how? That was the crux which perplexed, which frightened, which harassed her. For, if she told her suspicions, she exposed her lover to capture by one who had no longer a reason to be merciful. And if she sought occasion to see Tignonville and so to dissuade him, she did it at deadly risk to herself. Yet what other course lay open to her if she would not stand by? If she would not play the traitor? If she——

"Madame,"—it was her husband, and he spoke to her suddenly,—"are you not well?" And, looking up guiltily, she found his eyes fixed curiously on hers.

Her face turned red and white and red again, and she faltered something and looked from him, but only to meet Madame St. Lo's eyes. My lady laughed softly in sheer mischief.

"What is it?" Count Hannibal asked sharply.

But Madame St. Lo's answer was a line of Ronsard.

CHAPTER XX.

ON THE CASTLE HILL.

THRICE she hummed it, bland and smiling. Then from the neighbouring group came an interruption. The wine he had drunk had put it into Bigot's head to snatch a kiss from Suzanne; and Suzanne's modesty, which was very nice in company, obliged her to squeal. The uproar which ensued, the men backing the man and the women the woman, brought Tavannes to his feet. He did not speak, but a glance from his eyes was enough. There was not one who failed to see that something was amiss with him, and a sudden silence fell on the party.

He turned to the Countess. "You wished to see the castle?" he said. "You had better go now, but not alone." He cast his eyes over the company, and summoned La Tribe, who was seated with the Carlats. "Go with Madame," he said curtly. "She has a mind to climb the hill. Bear in mind, we start at three, and do not venture out of hearing."

"I understand, M. le Comte," the minister answered. He spoke quietly, but there was a strange light in his face as he turned to go with her.

None the less he was silent until Madame's lagging feet—for all her interest in the expedition was gone—had borne her a hundred paces from the company. Then, "Who knoweth our thoughts and foreruneth all our desires," he murmured. And when she

turned to him, astonished, "Madame," he continued, "I have prayed, ah, how I have prayed, for this opportunity of speaking to you! And it has come. I would it had come this morning, but it has come. Do not start or look round; many eyes are on us, and alas! I have that to say to you which it will move you to hear, and that to ask of you which it must task your courage to perform."

She began to tremble, and stood, looking up the green slope to the broken grey wall which crowned its summit. "What is it?" she whispered, commanding herself with an effort. "What is it? If it have aught to do with M. Tignonville——"

"It has not!"

In her surprise—for although she had put the question she had felt no doubt of the answer—she started and turned to him. "It has not?" she exclaimed almost incredulously.

"No."

"Then what is it, monsieur?" she replied, a little haughtily. "What can there be that should move me so?"

"Life or death, Madame," he answered solemnly. "Nay, more; for since Providence has given me this chance of speaking to you, a thing of which I despaired, I know that the burden is laid on us, and that it is guilt or it is innocence, according as we refuse the burden or bear it."

"What is it then?" she cried impatiently. "What is it?"

"I tried to speak to you this morning."

"Was it you then, whom Madame St. Lo saw stalking me before dinner?"

"It was."

She clasped her hands and heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank God, monsieur!" she replied. "You have lifted a weight from me. I fear nothing in comparison of that. Nothing!"

"Alas," he answered sombrely, "there is much to fear, for others if not for ourselves! Do you know what that is which M. de Tavannes bears always in his belt? What it is he carries with such care? What it was he handed to you to keep while he bathed to-day?"

"Letters from the King."

"Yes, but the import of those letters?"

"No."

"And yet should they be written in letters of blood!" the minister exclaimed, his face kindling. "They should scorch the hands that hold them and blister the eyes that read them. They are the fire and the sword! They are the King's order to do at Angers as they have done in Paris. To slay all of the religion who are found there—and they are many! To spare none, to have mercy neither on the old man nor the unborn child! See yonder hawk!" he continued, pointing with a shaking hand to a falcon which hung light and graceful above the valley, the movement of its wings invisible. "How it disports itself in the face of the sun! How easy its way, how smooth its flight! But see, it drops upon its prey in the rushes beside the brook, and the end of its beauty is slaughter! So is it with yonder company!" His finger sank until it indicated the little camp seated toy-like in the green meadow four hundred feet below them, with every man and horse, and the very camp-kettle, clear-cut and visible, though diminished by distance to fairy-like proportions. "So it is with

yonder company!" he repeated sternly. "They play and are merry, and one fishes and another sleeps! But at the end of the journey is death. Death for their victims, and for them the judgment!"

She stood, as he spoke, in the ruined gateway, a walled grass-plot behind her and at her feet the stream, the smiling valley, the alders, and the little camp. The sky was cloudless, the scene drowsy with the stillness of an August afternoon. But his words went home so truly that the sunlit landscape before the eyes added one more horror to the picture he called up before the mind.

The Countess turned white and sick. "Are you sure?" she whispered at last.

"Quite sure."

"Ah, God!" she cried, "are we never to have peace?" And turning from the valley, she walked some distance into the grass court, and stood. After a time, she turned to him; he had followed her doggedly, pace for pace. "What do you want me to do?" she cried, despair in her voice. "What can I do?"

"Were the letters he bears destroyed——"

"The letters?"

"Yes, were the letters destroyed," La Tribe answered relentlessly, "he could do nothing! Nothing! Without that authority the magistrates of Angers would not move. He could do nothing. And men and women and children—men and women and children whose blood will otherwise cry for vengeance, perhaps for vengeance on us who might have saved them—will live! Will live!" he repeated with a softening eye. And with an all-embracing gesture he seemed to call to witness the open heavens, the sun-

shine and the summer breeze which wrapped them round. "Will live!"

She drew a deep breath. "And you have brought me here," she said, "to ask me to do this?"

"I was sent here to ask you to do this."

"Why me? Why me?" she wailed, and she held out her open hands to him, her face wan and colourless. "You come to me, a woman! Why to me?"

"You are his wife!"

"And he is my husband!"

"Therefore he trusts you," was the unyielding, the pitiless answer. "You, and you alone, have the opportunity of doing this."

She gazed at him in astonishment. "And it is you who say that?" she faltered, after a pause. "You who made us one, who now bid me betray him, whom I have sworn to love? To ruin him whom I have sworn to honour?"

"I do!" he answered solemnly. "On my head be the guilt, and on yours the merit."

"Nay, but—" she cried quickly, and her eyes glittered with passion—"do you take both guilt and merit! You are a man," she continued, her words coming quickly in her excitement, "he is but a man! Why do you not call him aside, trick him apart on some pretence or other, and when there are but you two, man to man, wrench the warrant from him? Staking your life against his, with all those lives for prize? And save them or perish? Why I, even I, a woman, could find it in my heart to do that, were he not my husband! Surely you, you who are a man, and young——"

"Am no match for him in strength or arms," the minister answered sadly. "Else would I do it!

Else would I stake my life, Heaven knows, as gladly to save their lives as I sit down to meat! But I should fail, and if I failed all were lost. Moreover," he continued solemnly, "I am certified that this task has been set for you. It was not for nothing, Madame, nor to save one poor household that you were joined to this man; but to ransom all these lives and this great city. To be the Judith of our faith, the saviour of Angers, the——"

"Fool! Fool!" she cried. "Will you be silent?" And she stamped the turf passionately, while her eyes blazed in her white face. "I am no Judith, and no madwoman as you are fain to make me. Mad?" she continued, overwhelmed with agitation. "My God, I would I were, and I should be free from this!" And, turning, she walked a little way from him with the gesture of one under a crushing burden.

He waited a minute, two minutes, three minutes, and still she did not return. At length she came back, her bearing more composed; she looked at him and her eyes seized his and seemed as if they would read his soul. "Are you sure," she said, "of what you have told me? Will you swear that the contents of these letters are as you say?"

"As I live," he answered gravely. "As God lives."

"And you know—of no other way, monsieur? Of no other way?" she repeated slowly and piteously.

"Of none, Madame, of none, I swear."

She sighed deeply, and stood sunk in thought. Then, "When do we reach Angers?" she asked heavily.

"The day after to-morrow."

"I have—until the day after to-morrow?"

"Yes. To-night we lie near Vendôme."

"And to-morrow night?"

"Near a place called La Flèche. It is possible," he went on with hesitation—for he did not understand her—"that he may bathe to-morrow, and may hand the packet to you, as he did to-day when I vainly sought speech with you. If he does that——"

"Yes?" she said, her eyes on his face.

"The taking will be easy. But when he finds you have it not—" he faltered anew—"it may go hard with you."

She did not speak.

"And there, I think, I can help you. If you will stray from the party, I will meet you and destroy the letter. That done—and would God it were done already—I will take to flight as best I can, and you will raise the alarm and say that I robbed you of it! And if you tear your dress——"

"No," she said.

He looked a question.

"No!" she repeated in a low voice. "If I betray him I will not lie to him! And no other shall pay the price! If I ruin him it shall be between him and me, and no other shall have part in it!"

He shook his head. "I do not know," he murmured, "what he may do to you!"

"Nor I," she said proudly. "That will be for him."

. . . . . .

Curious eyes had watched the two as they climbed the hill. For the path ran up the slope to the gap which served for gate, much as the path leads up to the Castle Beautiful in old prints of the Pilgrim's journey; and Madame St. Lo had marked the first

halt and the second, and, noting every gesture, had lost nothing of the interview save the words. But until the two, after pausing a moment, passed out of sight she made no sign. Then she laughed. And as Count Hannibal, at whom the laugh was aimed, did not heed her, she laughed again. And she hummed the line of Ronsard.

Still he would not be roused, and, piqued, she had recourse to words. "I wonder what you would do," she said, "if the old lover followed us, and she went off with him!"

"She would not go," he answered coldly, and without looking up.

"But if he rode off with her?"

"She would come back on her feet!"

Madame St. Lo's prudence was not proof against that. She had the woman's inclination to hide a woman's secret; and she had not intended, when she laughed, to do more than play with the formidable man with whom so few dared to play. Now, stung by his tone and his assurance, she must needs show him that his trustfulness had no base. And, as so often happens in the circumstances, she went a little farther than the facts bore her. "Any way, he has followed us so far!" she cried viciously.

"M. de Tignonville?"

"Yes. I saw him this morning while you were bathing. She left me and went into the little coppice. He came down the other side of the brook, stooping and running, and went to join her."

"How did he cross the brook?"

Madame St. Lo blushed. "Old Badelon was there, gathering simples," she said. "He scared him. And he crawled away."

"Then he did not cross?"

"No. I did not say he did!"

"Nor speak to her?"

"No. But if you think it will pass so next time —you do not know much of women!"

"Of women generally, not much," he answered, grimly polite. "Of this woman a great deal!"

"You looked in her big eyes, I suppose!" Madame St. Lo cried with heat. "And straightway fell down and worshipped her!" She liked rather than disliked the Countess; but she was of the lightest, and the least opposition drove her out of her course. "And you think you know her! And she, if she could save you from death by opening an eye, would go with a patch on it till her dying day! Take my word for it, monsieur, between her and her lover you will come to harm."

Count Hannibal's swarthy face darkened a tone, and his eyes grew a very little smaller. "I fancy that he runs the greater risk," he muttered.

"You may deal with him, but, for her——"

"I can deal with her. You deal with some women with a whip——"

"You would whip me, I suppose?"

"Yes," he said quietly. "It would do you good, Madame. And with other women otherwise. There are women who, if they are well frightened, will not deceive you. And there are others who will not deceive you though they are frightened. Madame de Tavannes is of the latter kind."

"Wait! Wait and see!" Madame cried in scorn.

"I am waiting."

"Yes! And whereas if you had come to me I could have told her that about M. Tignonville which would

have surprised her, you will go on waiting and waiting and waiting until one fine day you'll wake up and find Madame gone, and——"

"Then I'll take a wife I can whip!" he answered, with a look which apprised her how far she had carried it. "But it will not be you, sweet cousin. For I have no whip heavy enough for your case."

CHAPTER XXI.

SHE WOULD, AND WOULD NOT.

We noted some way back the ease with which women use one concession as a stepping-stone to a second; and the lack of magnanimity, amounting almost to unscrupulousness, which the best display in their dealings with a retiring foe. But there are concessions which touch even a good woman's conscience; and Madame de Tavannes, free by the tenure of a blow, and with that exception treated from hour to hour with rugged courtesy, shrank appalled before the task which confronted her.

To ignore what La Tribe had told her, to remain passive when a movement on her part might save men, women, and children from death, and a whole city from massacre—this was a line of conduct so craven, so selfish that from the first she knew herself incapable of it. But to take the only other course open to her, to betray her husband and rob him of that, the loss of which might ruin him, this needed not courage only, not devotion only, but a hardness proof against reproaches as well as against punishment. And the Countess was no fanatic. No haze of bigotry glorified the thing she contemplated, or dressed it in colours other than its own. Even while she acknowledged the necessity of the act and its ultimate righteousness, even while she owned the obligation which lay upon her to perform it, she saw it

as he would see it, and saw herself as he would see her.

True, he had done her a great wrong; and this in the eyes of some might pass for punishment. But he had saved her life where many had perished; and, the wrong done, he had behaved to her with fantastic generosity. In return for which she was to ruin him! It was not hard to imagine what he would say of her, and of the reward with which she had requited him.

She pondered over it as they rode that evening, with the westering sun in their eyes and the lengthening shadows of the oaks falling athwart the bracken which fringed the track. Across breezy heaths and over downs, through green bottoms and by hamlets, from which every human creature fled at their approach, they ambled on by twos and threes; riding in a world of their own, so remote, so different from the real world—from which they came and to which they must return—that she could have wept in anguish, cursing God for the wickedness of man which lay so heavy on creation. The gaunt troopers riding at ease with swinging legs and swaying stirrups—and singing now a refrain from Ronsard, and now one of those verses of Marot's psalms which all the world had sung three decades before—wore their most lamb-like aspect. Behind them Madame St. Lo chattered to Suzanne of a riding mask which had not been brought, or planned expedients, if nothing sufficiently in the mode could be found at Angers. And the other women talked and giggled, screamed when they came to fords, and made much of steep places, where the men must help them. In time of war death's shadow covers but a day, and sorrow out of sight is out of mind. Of all the troop whom the sinking sun

left within sight of the lofty towers and vine-clad hills of Vendôme, three only wore faces attuned to the cruel August week just ending; three only, like dark beads strung far apart on a gay nun's rosary, rode, brooding and silent, in their places. The Countess was one; the others were the two men whose thoughts she filled, and whose eyes now and again sought her, La Tribe's with sombre fire in their depths, Count Hannibal's fraught with a gloomy speculation, which belied his brave words to Madame St. Lo.

He, moreover, as he rode, had other thoughts; dark ones, which did not touch her. And she, too, had other thoughts at times, dreams of her young lover, spasms of regret, a wild revolt of heart, a cry out of the darkness which had suddenly whelmed her. So that of the three only La Tribe was single-minded.

This day they rode a long league after sunset, through a scattered oak-wood, where the rabbits sprang up under their horses' heads and the squirrels made angry faces at them from the lower branches. Night was hard upon them when they reached the southern edge of the forest, and looked across the dusky open slopes to a distant light or two which marked where Vendôme stood. "Another league," Count Hannibal muttered; and he bade the men light fires where they were, and unload the packhorses. "'Tis pure and dry here," he said. "Set a watch, Bigot, and let two men go down for water. I hear frogs below. You do not fear to be moonstruck, Madame?"

"I prefer this," she answered in a low voice.

"Houses are for monks and nuns!" he rejoined heartily. "Give me God's heaven."

"The earth is His, but we deface it," she murmured, reverting to her thoughts, and unconscious that it was to him she spoke.

He looked at her sharply, but the fire was not yet kindled; and in the gloaming her face was a pale blot undecipherable. He stood a moment, but she did not speak again; and Madame St. Lo bustling up, he moved away to give an order. By-and-by the fires burned up, and showed the pillared aisle in which they sat, small groups dotted here and there on the floor of Nature's cathedral. Through the shadowy Gothic vaulting, the groining of many boughs which met overhead, a rare star twinkled, as through some clerestory window; and from the dell below rose in the night, now the monotonous chanting of the frogs, and now, as some great bull-frog took the note, a diapason worthy of a Brescian organ. The darkness walled all in; the night was still; a falling caterpillar sounded. Even the rude men at the farthest fire stilled their voices at times; awed, they knew not why, by the silence and vastness of the night.

The Countess long remembered that vigil—for she lay late awake; the cool gloom, the faint wood-rustlings, the distant cry of fox or wolf, the soft glow of the expiring fires that at last left the world to darkness and the stars; above all, the silent wheeling of the planets, which spoke indeed of a supreme Ruler, but crushed the heart under a sense of its insignificance, and of the insignificance of all human revolutions. "Yet, I believe!" she cried, wrestling upwards, wrestling with herself. "Though I have seen what I have seen, yet I believe!"

And though she had to bear what she had to bear, and do that from which her soul shrank! The wo-

man, indeed, within her continued to cry out against this tragedy ever renewed in her path, against this necessity for choosing evil or good, ease for herself or life for others. But the moving heavens, pointing onward to a time when good and evil alike should be past, strengthened a nature essentially noble; and before she slept no shame and no suffering seemed—for the moment at least—too great a price to pay for the lives of little children. Love had been taken from her life; the pride which would fain answer generosity with generosity—that must go, too!

She felt no otherwise when the day came, and the bustle of the start and the common round of the journey put to flight the ideals of the night. But things fell out in a manner she had not pictured. They halted before noon on the north bank of the Loir, in a level meadow with lines of poplars running this way and that, and filling all the place with the soft shimmer of leaves. Blue succory, tiny mirrors of the summer sky, flecked the long grass, and the women picked bunches of them, or, Italian fashion, twined the blossoms in their hair. A road ran across the meadow to a ferry, but the ferryman, alarmed by the aspect of the party, had conveyed his boat to the other side and hidden himself.

Presently Madame St. Lo espied the boat, clapped her hands and must have it. The poplars threw no shade, the flies teased her, the life of a hermit—in a meadow—was no longer to her taste. "Let us go on the water!" she cried. "Presently you will go to bathe, monsieur, and leave us to grill!"

"Two livres to the man who will fetch the boat!" Count Hannibal cried. In less than half a minute three men had thrown off their boots, and were swim-

ming across, amid the laughter and shouts of their fellows. In five minutes the boat was brought.

It was not large and would hold no more than four. Tavannes' eye fell on Carlat. "You understand a boat," he said. "Go with Madame St. Lo. And you, M. La Tribe."

"But you are coming?" Madame St. Lo cried, turning to the Countess. "Oh, Madame," with a curtsey, "you are not? You——"

"Yes, I will come," the Countess answered.

"I shall bathe a short distance up the stream," Count Hannibal said. He took from his belt the packet of letters, and as Carlat held the boat for Madame St. Lo to enter, he gave it to the Countess, as he had given it to her yesterday. "Have a care of it, Madame," he said in a low voice, "and do not let it pass out of your hands. To lose it may be to lose my head."

The colour ebbed from her cheeks. In spite of herself her shaking hand put back the packet. "Had you not better then—give it to Bigot?" she faltered.

"He is bathing."

"Let him bathe afterwards."

"No," he answered almost harshly; he found a species of pleasure in showing her that, strange as their relations were, he trusted her. "No; take it, Madame. Only have a care of it."

She took it then, hid it in her dress, and he turned away; and she turned towards the boat. La Tribe stood beside the stern, holding it for her to enter, and as her fingers rested an instant on his arm their eyes met. His were alight, his arm even quivered; and she shuddered.

She avoided looking at him a second time, and this was easy, since he took his seat in the bows beyond Carlat, who handled the oars. Silently the boat glided out on the surface of the stream, and floated downwards, Carlat now and again touching an oar, and Madame St. Lo chattering gaily in a voice which carried far on the water. Now it was a flowering rush she must have, now a green bough to shield her face from the sun's reflection; and now they must lie in some cool, shadowy pool under fern-clad banks, where the fish rose heavily, and the trickle of a rivulet fell down over stones.

It was idyllic. But not to the Countess. Her face burned, her temples throbbed, her fingers gripped the side of the boat in the vain attempt to steady her pulses. The packet within her dress scorched her. The great city and its danger, Tavannes and his faith in her, the need of action, the irrevocableness of action hurried through her brain. The knowledge that she must act now—or never—pressed upon her with distracting force. Her hand felt the packet, and fell again nerveless.

"The sun has caught you, *ma mie*," Madame St. Lo said. "You should ride in a mask as I do."

"I have not one with me," she muttered, her eyes on the water.

"And I but an old one. But at Angers——"

The Countess heard no more; on that word she caught La Tribe's eye. He was beckoning to her behind Carlat's back, pointing imperiously to the water, making signs to her to drop the packet over the side. When she did not obey—she felt sick and faint—she saw through a mist his brow grow dark. He menaced her secretly. And still the packet scorched her;

and twice her hand went to it, and dropped again empty.

On a sudden Madame St. Lo cried out. The bank on one side of the stream was beginning to rise more boldly above the water, and at the head of the steep thus formed she had espied a late rose-bush in bloom; nothing would now serve but she must land at once and plunder it. The boat was put in therefore, she jumped ashore, and began to scale the bank.

"Go with Madame!" La Tribe cried, roughly nudging Carlat in the back. "Do you not see that she cannot climb the bank? Up, man, up!"

The Countess opened her mouth to cry "No!" but the word died half-born on her lips; and when the steward looked at her, uncertain what she had said, she nodded. "Yes, go!" she muttered. She was pale.

"Yes, man, go!" cried the minister, his eyes burning. And he almost pushed the other out of the boat.

The next second the craft floated from the bank, and began to drift downwards. La Tribe waited until a tree interposed and hid them from the two whom they had left; then he leaned forward. "Now, Madame!" he cried imperiously. "In God's name, now!"

"Oh!" she cried. "Wait! Wait! I want to think."

"To think?"

"He trusted me!" she wailed. "He trusted me! How can I do it?" Nevertheless, and even while she spoke, she drew forth the packet.

"Heaven has given you the opportunity!"

"If I could have stolen it!" she answered.

"Fool!" he returned rocking himself to and fro and fairly beside himself with impatience. "Why steal it? It is in your hands! You have it! It is

Heaven's own opportunity, it is God's opportunity given to you!"

For he could not read her mind nor comprehend the scruple which held her hand. He was single-minded. He had but one aim, one object. He saw the haggard faces of brave men hopeless; he heard the dying cries of women and children. Such an opportunity of saving God's elect, of redeeming the innocent, was in his eyes a gift from Heaven. And having these thoughts and seeing her hesitate—hesitate when every movement caused him agony, so imperative was haste, so precious the opportunity—he could bear the suspense no longer. When she did not answer he stooped forward, until his knees touched the thwart on which Carlat had sat; then without a word he flung himself forward, and, with one hand far extended, grasped the packet.

Had he not moved, she would have done his will; almost certainly she would have done it. But, thus attacked, she resisted instinctively; she clung to the letters. "No!" she cried. "No! Let go, monsieur!" And she tried to drag the packet from him.

"Give it me!"

"Let go, monsieur! Do you hear?" she repeated. And with a vigorous jerk she forced it from him—he had caught it by the edge only—and held it behind her. "Go back, and——"

"Give it me!" he panted.

"I will not!"

"Then throw it overboard!"

"I will not!" she cried again, though his face, dark with passion, glared into hers, and it was clear that the man, possessed by one idea only, was no longer master of himself. "Go back to your place!"

"Give it me," he gasped, "or I will upset the boat!" And seizing her by the shoulder he reached over her, striving to take hold of the packet which she held behind her. The boat rocked; and as much in rage as fear she screamed.

A cry uttered wholly in rage answered hers; it came from Carlat. La Tribe, however, whose whole mind was fixed on the packet, did not heed, nor would have heeded, the steward. But the next moment a second cry, fierce as that of a wild beast, clove the air from the lower and farther bank; and the Huguenot, recognising Count Hannibal's voice, involuntarily desisted and stood erect. A moment the boat rocked perilously under him; then—for unheeded it had been drifting that way—it softly touched the bank on which Carlat stood staring and aghast.

La Tribe's chance was gone; he saw that the steward must reach him before he could succeed in a second attempt. On the other hand, the undergrowth on the bank was thick, he could touch it with his hand, and if he fled at once he might escape.

He hung an instant irresolute; then, with a look which went to the Countess's heart, he sprang ashore, plunged among the alders, and in a moment was gone.

"After him! After him!" thundered Count Hannibal. "After him, man!" and Carlat, stumbling down the steep slope and through the rough briars, did his best to obey. But in vain. Before he reached the water's edge, the noise of the fugitive's retreat had grown faint. A few seconds and it died away.

CHAPTER XXII.

PLAYING WITH FIRE.

THE impulse of La Tribe's foot as he landed had driven the boat into the stream. It drifted slowly downward, and if naught intervened would take the ground on Count Hannibal's side, a hundred and fifty yards below him. He saw this, and walked along the bank, keeping pace with it, while the Countess sat motionless, crouching in the stern of the craft, her fingers strained about the fatal packet. The slow glide of the boat, as almost imperceptibly it approached the low bank; the stillness of the mirror-like surface on which it moved, leaving only the faintest ripple behind it; the silence—for under the influence of emotion Count Hannibal too was mute—all were in tremendous contrast with the storm which raged in her breast.

Should she—should she even now, with his eyes on her, drop the letters over the side? It needed but a movement. She had only to extend her hand, to relax the tension of her fingers, and the deed was done. It needed only that; but the golden sands of opportunity were running out—were running out fast. Slowly and more slowly, silently and more silently, the boat slid in towards the bank on which he stood, and still she hesitated. The stillness, and the waiting figure, and the watching eyes now but a few feet distant, weighed on her and seemed to paralyse her will.

A foot, another foot! A moment and it would be too late, the last of the sands would have run out. The bow of the boat rustled softly through the rushes; it kissed the bank. And her hand still held the letters.

"You are not hurt?" he asked curtly.

"No."

"The scoundrel might have drowned you. Was he mad?"

She was silent. He held out his hand, and she gave him the packet. "I owe you much," he said, a ring of gaiety, almost of triumph, in his tone. "More than you guess, Madame. God made you for a soldier's wife, and a mother of soldiers. What? You are not well, I am afraid?"

"If I could sit down a minute," she faltered. She was swaying on her feet.

He supported her across the belt of meadow which fringed the bank, and made her recline against a tree. Then as his men began to come up—for the alarm had reached them—he would have sent two of them in the boat to fetch Madame St. Lo to her. But she would not let him. "Your maid, then?" he said.

"No, monsieur, I need only to be alone a little! Only to be alone," she repeated, her face averted; and believing this he sent the men away, and, taking the boat himself, he crossed over, took in Madame St. Lo and Carlat, and rowed them to the ferry. Here the wildest rumours were current. One held that the Huguenot had gone out of his senses; another, that he had watched for this opportunity of avenging his brethren; a third, that his intention had been to carry off the Countess and hold her to ransom. Only

Tavannes himself, from his position on the farther bank, had seen the packet of letters, and the hand which withheld them; and he said nothing. Nay, when some of the men would have crossed to search for the fugitive, he forbade them, he scarcely knew why, save that it might please her; and when the women would have hurried to join her and hear the tale from her lips he forbade them also.

"She wishes to be alone," he said curtly.

"Alone?" Madame St. Lo cried, in a fever of curiosity. "You'll find her dead, or worse! What? Leave a woman alone after such a fright as that!"

"She wishes it."

Madame laughed cynically; and the laugh brought a tinge of colour to his brow. "Oh, does she?" she sneered. "Then I understand! Have a care, have a care, or one of these days, monsieur, when you leave her alone, you'll find them together!"

"Be silent!"

"With pleasure," she returned. "Only when it happens don't say that you were not warned. You think that she does not hear from him——"

"How can she hear?" The words were wrung from him.

Madame St. Lo's contempt passed all limits. "How can she!" she retorted. "You trail a woman across France, and let her sit by herself, and lie by herself, and all but drown by herself, and you ask how she hears from her lover? You leave her old servants about her, and you ask how she communicates with him?"

"You know nothing!" he snarled.

"I know this," she retorted. "I saw her sitting this morning, and smiling and weeping at the same

time! Was she thinking of you, monsieur? Or of him? She was looking at the hills through tears; a blue mist hung over them, and I'll wager she saw some one's eyes gazing and some one's hand beckoning out of the blue!"

"Curse you!" he cried, tormented in spite of himself. "You love to make mischief!"

"No!" she answered swiftly. "For 'twas not I made the match. But go your way, go your way, monsieur, and see what kind of a welcome you'll get!"

"I will," Count Hannibal growled. And he started along the bank to rejoin his wife.

The light in his eyes had died down. Yet would they have been more sombre, and his face more harsh, had he known the mind of the woman to whom he was hastening. The Countess had begged to be left alone; alone, she found the solitude she had craved a cruel gift. She had saved the packet. She had fulfilled her trust. But only to experience, the moment it was too late, the full poignancy of remorse. Before the act, while the choice had lain with her, the betrayal of her husband had loomed large; now she saw that to treat him as she had treated him was the true betrayal, and that even for his own sake, and to save him from a fearful sin, it had become her to destroy the letters.

Now, it was no longer her duty to him which loomed large, but her duty to the innocent, to the victims of the massacre which she might have stayed, to the people of her faith whom she had abandoned, to the women and children whose death-warrant she had preserved. Now, she perceived that a part more divine had never fallen to woman, nor a responsibil-

ity so heavy been laid upon woman. Nor guilt more dread!

She writhed in misery, thinking of it. What had she done? She could hear afar off the sounds of the camp; an occasional outcry, a snatch of laughter. And the cry and the laughter rang in her ears, a bitter mockery. This summer camp, to what was it the prelude? This forbearance on her husband's part, in what would it end? Were not the one and the other cruel make-believes? Two days, and the men who laughed beside the water would slay and torture with equal zest. A little, and the husband who now chose to be generous would show himself in his true colours. And it was for the sake of such as these that she had played the coward. That she had laid up for herself endless remorse. That henceforth the cries of the innocent would haunt her dreams.

Racked by such thoughts she did not hear his step, and it was his shadow falling across her feet which first warned her of his presence. She looked up, saw him, and involuntarily recoiled. Then, seeing the change in his face, "Oh! monsieur," she stammered affrighted, her hand pressed to her side, "I ask your pardon! You startled me!"

"So it seems," he answered. And he stood over her regarding her drily.

"I am not quite—myself yet," she murmured. His look told her that her start had betrayed her feelings.

Alas, the plan of taking a woman by force has drawbacks, and among others this one: that he must be a sanguine husband who deems her heart his, and a husband without jealousy, whose suspicions are not aroused by the faintest flush or the lightest word. He knows that she is his unwillingly, a victim, not a

mistress; and behind every bush beside the road and behind every mask in the crowd he espies a rival.

Moreover, where women are in question, who is always strong? Or who can say how long he will pursue this plan or that? A man of sternest temper, Count Hannibal had set out on a path of conduct carefully and deliberately chosen; knowing—and he still knew—that if he abandoned it he had little to hope, if the less to fear. But the proof of fidelity which the Countess had just given him had blown to a white heat the smouldering flame in his heart, and Madame St. Lo's gibes, which should have fallen as cold water alike on his hopes and his passion, had but fed the desire to know the best. For all that, he might not have spoken now, if he had not caught her look of affright; strange as it sounds, that look, which of all things should have silenced him and warned him that the time was not yet, stung him out of patience. Suddenly the man in him carried him away.

"You still fear me, then?" he said, in a voice hoarse and unnatural. "Is it for what I do or for what I leave undone that you hate me, Madame? Tell me, I beg, for——"

"For neither!" she said, trembling. His eyes, hot and passionate, were on her, and the blood had mounted to his brow. "For neither! I do not hate you, monsieur!"

"You fear me then? I am right in that."

"I fear—that which you carry with you," she stammered, speaking on impulse and scarcely knowing what she said.

He started, and his expression changed. "So?" he exclaimed. "So? You know what I carry, do you?

And from whom? From whom?" he continued in a tone of menace, "if you please, did you get that knowledge?"

"From M. La Tribe," she muttered. She had not meant to tell him. Why had she told him?

He nodded. "I might have known it," he said. "I more than suspected it. Therefore I should be the more beholden to you for saving the letters. But"—he paused and laughed harshly—"it was out of no love for me you saved them. That, too, I know."

She did not answer or protest; and when he had waited a moment in vain expectation of her protest, a cruel look crept into his eyes. "Madame," he said slowly, "do you never reflect that you may push the part you play too far? That the patience, even of the worst of men, does not endure for ever?"

"I have your word!" she answered.

"And you do not fear?"

"I have your word," she repeated. And now she looked him bravely in the face, her eyes full of the courage of her race.

The lines of his mouth hardened as he met her look. "And what have I of yours?" he said in a low voice. "What have I of yours?"

Her face began to burn at that, her eyes fell and she faltered. "My gratitude," she murmured, with an upward look that craved for pity. "God knows, monsieur, you have that!"

"God knows I do not want it!" he answered. And he laughed derisively. "Your gratitude!" And he mocked her tone rudely and coarsely. "Your gratitude?" Then for a minute—for so long a time that she began to wonder and to quake—he

was silent. At last, "A fig for your gratitude," he said. "I want your love! I suppose—cold as you are, and a Huguenot—you can love like other women!"

It was the first, the very first time he had used the word to her; and though it fell from his lips like a threat, though he used it as a man presents a pistol, she flushed anew from throat to brow. But she did not quail. "It is not mine to give," she said.

"It is his?"

"Yes, monsieur," she answered, wondering at her courage, at her audacity, her madness. "It is his."

"And it cannot be mine—at any time?"

She shook her head, trembling.

"Never?" And, suddenly reaching forward, he gripped her wrist in an iron grasp. There was passion in his tone. His eyes burned her.

Whether it was that set her on another track, or pure despair, or the cry in her ears of little children and of helpless women, something in a moment inspired her, flashed in her eyes and altered her voice. She raised her head and looked him firmly in the face. "What," she said, "do you mean by love?"

"You!" he answered brutally.

"Then—it may be, monsieur," she returned. "There is a way if you will."

"A way!"

"If you will!" As she spoke she rose slowly to her feet; for in his surprise he had released her wrist. He rose with her, and they stood confronting one another on the strip of grass between the river and the poplars.

"If I will?" His form seemed to dilate, his eyes devoured her. "If I will?"

"Yes," she replied. "If you will give me the letters that are in your belt, the packet which I saved to-day—that I may destroy them—I will be yours freely and willingly."

He drew a deep breath, still devouring her with his eyes. "You mean it?" he said at last.

"I do." She looked him in the face as she spoke, and her cheeks were white, not red. "Only—the letters! Give me the letters."

"And for them you will give me your love?"

Her eyes flickered, and involuntarily she shivered. A faint blush rose and dyed her cheeks. "Only God can give love," she said, her tone lower.

"And yours is given?"

"Yes."

"To another?"

"I have said it."

"It is his. And yet for these letters——"

"For these lives!" she cried proudly.

"You will give yourself?"

"I swear it," she answered, "if you will give them to me! If you will give them to me," she repeated. And she held out her hands; her face, full of passion, was bright with a strange light. A close observer might have thought her distraught; still excited by the struggle in the boat, and barely mistress of herself.

But the man whom she tempted, the man who held her price at his belt, after one searching look at her turned from her; perhaps because he could not trust himself to gaze on her. Count Hannibal walked a dozen paces from her and returned, and again a dozen paces and returned; and again a third time, with something fierce and passionate in his gait. At last he stopped before her.

"You have nothing to offer for them," he said, in a cold, hard tone. "Nothing that is not mine already, nothing that is not my right, nothing that I cannot take at my will. My word?" he continued, seeing her about to interrupt him. "True, Madame, you have it, you had it. But why need I keep my word to you, who tempt me to break my word to the King?"

She made a weak gesture with her hands. Her head had sunk on her breast—she seemed dazed by the shock of his contempt, dazed by his reception of her offer.

"You saved the letters?" he continued, interpreting her action. "True, but the letters are mine, and that which you offer for them is mine also. You have nothing to offer. For the rest, Madame," he went on, eyeing her cynically, "you surprise me! You, whose modesty and virtue are so great, would corrupt your husband, would sell yourself, would dishonour the love of which you boast so loudly, the love that only God gives!" He laughed derisively as he quoted her words. "Ay, and, after showing at how low a price you hold yourself, you still look, I doubt not, to me to respect you, and to keep my word. Madame!" in a terrible voice, "do not play with fire! You saved my letters, it is true! And for that, for this time, you shall go free, if God will help me to let you go! But tempt me not! Tempt me not!" he repeated, turning from her and turning back again with a gesture of despair, as if he mistrusted the strength of the restraint which he put upon himself. "I am no more than other men! Perhaps I am less. And you—you who prate of love, and know not what love is—could love! could love!"

He stopped on that word as if the word choked him —stopped, struggling with his passion. At last, with a half-stifled oath, he flung away from her, halted and hung a moment, then, with a swing of rage, went off again violently. His feet as he strode along the river-bank trampled the flowers, and slew the pale water forget-me-not, which grew among the grasses.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A MIND, AND NOT A MIND.

La Tribe tore through the thicket, imagining Carlat and Count Hannibal hot on his heels. He dared not pause even to listen. The underwood tripped him, the lissom branches of the alders whipped his face and blinded him; once he fell headlong over a moss-grown stone, and picked himself up groaning. But the hare hard-pushed takes no account of the briars, nor does the fox heed the mud through which it draws itself into covert. And for the time he was naught but a hunted beast. With elbows pinned to his sides, or with hands extended to ward off the boughs, with bursting lungs and crimson face, he plunged through the tangle, now slipping downwards, now leaping upwards, now all but prostrate, now breasting a mass of thorns. On and on he ran, until he came to the verge of the wood, saw before him an open meadow devoid of shelter or hiding-place, and with a groan of despair cast himself flat. He listened. How far were they behind him?

He heard nothing. Nothing, save the common noises of the wood, the angry chatter of a disturbed blackbird as it flew low into hiding, or the harsh notes of a flock of starlings as they rose from the meadow. The hum of bees filled the air, and the August flies buzzed about his sweating brow, for he

had lost his cap. But behind him—nothing. Already the stillness of the wood had closed upon his track.

He was not the less panic-stricken. He supposed that Tavannes' people were getting to horse, and calculated that if they surrounded and beat the wood, he must be taken. At the thought, though he had barely got his breath, he rose, and keeping within the coppice crawled down the slope towards the river. Gently, when he reached it, he slipped into the water, and stooping below the level of the bank, his head and shoulders hidden by the bushes, he waded down stream until he had put another hundred and fifty yards between himself and pursuit. Then he paused and listened. Still he heard nothing, and he waded on again, until the water grew deep. At this point he marked a little below him a clump of trees on the farther side; and reflecting that that side—if he could reach it unseen—would be less suspect, he swam across, aiming for a thorn bush which grew low to the water. Under its shelter he crawled out, and, worming himself like a snake across the few yards of grass which intervened, he stood at length within the shadow of the trees. A moment he paused to shake himself, and then, remembering that he was still within a mile of the camp, he set off, now walking, and now running in the direction of the hills which his party had crossed that morning.

For a time he hurried on, thinking only of escape. But when he had covered a mile or two, and escape seemed probable, there began to mingle with his thankfulness a bitter—a something which grew more bitter with each moment. Why had he fled and left the work undone? Why had he given way to un-

worthy fear, when the letters were within his grasp? True, if he had lingered a few seconds longer, he would have failed to make good his escape; but what of that if in those seconds he had destroyed the letters, he had saved Angers, he had saved his brethren? Alas! he had played the coward. The terror of Tavannes' voice had unmanned him. He had saved himself and left the flock to perish; he, whom God had set apart by many and great signs for this work!

He had commonly courage enough. He could have died at the stake for his convictions. But he had not the presence of mind which is proof against a shock, nor the cool judgment which, in the face of death, sees to the end of two roads. He was no coward, but now he deemed himself one, and in an agony of remorse he flung himself on his face in the long grass. He had known trials and temptations, but hitherto he had held himself erect; now, like Peter, he had betrayed his Lord.

He lay an hour groaning in the misery of his heart, and then he fell on the text "Thou art Peter, and on this rock——" and he sat up. Peter had betrayed his trust through cowardice—as he had. But Peter had not been held unworthy. Might it not be so with him? He rose to his feet, a new light in his eyes. He would return! He would return, and at all costs, even at the cost of surrendering himself, he would obtain access to the letters. And then—not the fear of Count Hannibal, not the fear of instant death, should turn him from his duty.

He had cast himself down in a woodland glade which lay near the path along which he had ridden that morning. But the mental conflict from which he rose had shaken him so violently that he could not

recall the side on which he had entered the clearing, and he turned himself about, endeavouring to remember. At that moment the light jingle of a bridle struck his ear; he caught through the green bushes the flash and sparkle of harness. They had tracked him then, they were here! So had he clear proof that this second chance was to be his. In a happy fervour he stood forward where the pursuers could not fail to see him.

Or so he thought. Yet the first horseman, riding carelessly with his face averted and his feet dangling, would have gone by and seen nothing if his horse, more watchful, had not shied. The man turned then; and for a moment the two stared at one another between the pricked ears of the horse. At last,

"M. de Tignonville!" the minister ejaculated.

"La Tribe!"

"It is truly you?"

"Well—I think so," the young man answered.

The minister lifted up his eyes and seemed to call the trees and the clouds and the birds to witness. "Now," he cried, "I know that I am chosen! And that we were instruments to do this thing from the day when the hen saved us in the hay-cart in Paris! Now I know that all is forgiven and all is ordained, and that the faithful of Angers shall to-morrow live and not die!" And with a face radiant, yet solemn, he walked to the young man's stirrup.

An instant Tignonville looked sharply before him. "How far ahead are they?" he asked. His tone, hard and matter-of-fact, was little in harmony with the other's enthusiasm.

"They are resting a league before you, at the ferry. You are in pursuit of them?"

"Yes."

"Not alone?"

"No." The young man's look as he spoke was grim. "I have five behind me—of your kidney, M. La Tribe. They are from the Arsenal. They have lost one his wife, and one his son. The three others——"

"Yes?"

"Sweethearts," Tignonville answered drily. And he cast a singular look at the minister.

But La Tribe's mind was so full of one matter, he could think only of that. "How did you hear of the letters?" he asked.

"The letters?"

"Yes."

"I do not know what you mean."

La Tribe stared. "Then why are you following him?" he asked.

"Why?" Tignonville echoed, a look of hate darkening his face. "Do you ask why we follow——" But on the name he seemed to choke and was silent.

By this time his men had come up, and one answered for him. "Why are we following Hannibal de Tavannes?" he said sternly. "To do to him as he has done to us! To rob him as he has robbed us —of more than gold! To kill him as he has killed ours, foully and by surprise! In his bed if we can! In the arms of his wife if God wills it!"

The speaker's face was haggard from brooding and lack of sleep, but his eyes glowed and burned, as his fellows growled assent.

"'Tis simple why we follow," a second put in. "Is there a man of our faith who will not, when he

hears the tale, rise up and stab the nearest of this black brood—though it be his brother? If so, God's curse on him!"

"Amen! Amen!"

"So, and so only," cried the first, "shall there be faith in our land! And our children, our little maids, shall lie safe in their beds!"

"Amen! Amen!"

The speaker's chin sank on his breast, and with his last word the light died out of his eyes. La Tribe looked at him curiously, then at the others. Last of all at Tignonville, on whose face he fancied that he surprised a faint smile. Yet Tignonville's tone when he spoke was grave enough. "You have heard," he said. "Do you blame us?"

"I cannot," the minister answered, shivering. "I cannot." He had been for a while beyond the range of these feelings; and in the greenwood, under God's heaven, with the sunshine about him, they jarred on him. Yet he could not blame men who had suffered as these had suffered; who were maddened, as these were maddened, by the gravest wrongs which it is possible for one man to inflict on another. "I dare not," he continued sorrowfully. "But in God's name I offer you a higher and a nobler errand."

"We need none," Tignonville muttered impatiently.

"Yet may others need you," La Tribe answered in a tone of rebuke. "You are not aware that the man you follow bears a packet from the King for the hands of the magistrates of Angers?"

"Ha! Does he?"

"Bidding them do at Angers as his Majesty has done in Paris?"

The men broke into cries of execration. "But he

shall not see Angers!" they swore. "The blood that he has shed shall choke him by the way! And as he would do to others it shall be done to him."

La Tribe shuddered as he listened, as he looked. Try as he would, the thirst of these men for vengeance appalled him. "How?" he said. "He has a score and more with him: and you are only six."

"Seven now," Tignonville answered with a smile.

"True, but——"

"And he lies to-night at La Flèche? That is so?"

"It was his intention this morning."

"At the old King's Inn at the meeting of the great roads?"

"It was mentioned," La Tribe admitted, with a reluctance he did not comprehend. "But if the night be fair he is as like as not to lie in the fields."

One of the men pointed to the sky. A dark bank of cloud fresh risen from the ocean, and big with tempest, hung low in the west. "See! God will deliver him into our hands!" he cried.

Tignonville nodded. "If he lie there," he said, "He will." And then to one of his followers, as he dismounted, "Do you ride on," he said, "and stand guard that we be not surprised. And do you, Perrot, tell monsieur. Perrot here, as God wills it," he added with a faint smile which did not escape the minister's eye, "married his wife from the great inn at La Flèche, and he knows the place."

"None better," the man growled. He was a sullen, brooding knave, whose eyes when he looked up surprised by their savage fire.

La Tribe shook his head. "I know it, too," he said. "'Tis strong as a fortress, with a walled court, and all the windows look inwards. The gates are

closed an hour after sunset, no matter who is without. If you think, M. de Tignonville, to take him there——"

"Patience, monsieur, you have not heard me," Perrot interposed. "I know it after another fashion. Do you remember a rill of water which runs through the great yard and the stables?"

La Tribe nodded.

"Grated with iron at either end, and no passage for so much as a dog? You do? Well, monsieur, I have hunted rats there, and where the water passes under the wall is a culvert, a man's height in length. In it is a stone, one of those which frame the grating at the entrance, which a strong man can remove—and the man is in!"

"Ay, in! But where?" La Tribe asked, his eyebrows drawn together.

"Well said, monsieur, where?" Perrot rejoined in a tone of triumph. "There lies the point. In the stables, where will be sleeping men, and a snorer on every truss? No, but in a fairway between two stables where the water at its entrance runs clear in a stone channel; a channel deepened in one place that they may draw for the chambers above with a rope and a bucket. The rooms above are the best in the house, four in one row, opening all on the gallery; which was uncovered, in the common fashion, until Queen-Mother Jezebel, passing that way to Nantes, two years back, found the chambers draughty; and that end of the gallery was closed in against her return. Now, monsieur, he and his madame will lie there; and he will feel safe, for there is but one way to those four rooms—through the door which shuts off the covered gallery from the open part. But——"

he glanced up an instant and La Tribe caught the smouldering fire in his eyes—"we shall not go in by the door."

"The bucket rises through a trap?"

"In the gallery? To be sure, monsieur. In the corner beyond the fourth door. There shall he fall into the pit which he dug for others, and the evil that he planned rebound on his own head!"

La Tribe was silent. "What think you of it?" Tignonville asked.

"That it is cleverly planned," the minister answered.

"No more than that?"

"No more until I have eaten."

"Get him something!" Tignonville replied in a surly tone. "And we may as well eat, ourselves. Lead the horses into the wood. And do you, Perrot, call Tuez-les-Moines, who is forward. Two hours' riding should bring us to La Flèche. We need not leave here, therefore, until the sun is low. To dinner! To dinner!"

Probably he did not feel the indifference he affected, for his face as he ate grew darker, and from time to time he shot a glance, barbed with suspicion, at the minister. La Tribe on his side remained silent, although the men ate apart. He was in doubt, indeed, as to his own feelings. His instinct and his reason were at odds. Through all, however, a single purpose, the rescue of Angers, held good, and gradually other things fell into their places. When the meal was at an end, and Tignonville challenged him, he was ready.

"Your enthusiasm seems to have waned," the younger man said with a sneer, "since we met, mon-

sieur! May I ask now if you find any fault with the plan?"

"With the plan, none."

"If it was Providence brought us together, was it not Providence furnished me with Perrot who knows La Flèche? If it was Providence brought the danger of the faithful in Angers to your knowledge, was it not Providence set us on the road—without whom you had been powerless?"

"I believe it!"

"Then, in His name, what is the matter?" Tignonville rejoined with a passion of which the other's manner seemed an inadequate cause. "What will you? What is it?"

"I would take your place," La Tribe answered quietly.

"My place?"

"Yes."

"What, are we too many?"

"We are enough without you, M. Tignonville," the minister answered. "These men, who have wrongs to avenge, God will justify them."

Tignonville's eyes sparkled with anger. "And have I no wrongs to avenge?" he cried. "Is it nothing to lose my mistress, to be robbed of my wife, to see the woman I love dragged off to be a slave and a toy? Are these no wrongs?"

"He spared your life, if he did not save it," the minister said solemnly. "And hers. And her servants."

"To suit himself."

La Tribe spread out his hands.

"To suit himself! And for that you wish him to go free?" Tignonville cried in a voice half-choked

with rage. "Do you know that this man, and this man alone, stood forth in the great Hall of the Louvre, and when even the King flinched, justified the murder of our people? After that is he to go free?"

"At your hands," La Tribe answered quietly. "You alone of our people must not pursue him." He would have added more, but Tignonville would not listen.

Brooding on his wrongs behind the wall of the Arsenal, he had let hatred eat away his more generous instincts. Vain and conceited, he fancied that the world laughed at the poor figure he had cut; and the wound in his vanity festered until nothing would serve but to see the downfall of his enemy. Instant pursuit, instant vengeance—only these, he fancied, could restore him in his fellows' eyes.

In his heart he knew what would become him better. But vanity is a potent motive: and his conscience, even when supported by La Tribe, struggled but weakly. From neither would he hear more. "You have travelled with him, until you side with him!" he cried violently. "Have a care, monsieur, have a care lest we think you papist!" And walking over to the men he bade them saddle; adding a sour word which turned their eyes, in no friendly gaze, on the minister.

After that La Tribe said no more. Of what use would it have been?

But as darkness came on and cloaked the little troop, and the storm which the men had foreseen began to rumble in the west, his distaste for the business waxed. The summer lightning which presently began to play across the sky revealed not only the

broad gleaming stream, between which and a wooded hill their road ran, but the faces of his companions; and these in their turn shed a grisly light on the bloody enterprise towards which they were set. Nervous and ill at ease, the minister's mind dwelt on the stages of that enterprise; the stealthy entrance through the waterway, the ascent through the trap, the surprise, the slaughter in the sleeping-chamber. And either because he had lived for days in the victim's company, or was swayed by the arguments he had addressed to another, the prospect shook his soul.

In vain he told himself that this was the oppressor; he saw only the man, fresh roused from sleep, with the horror of impending dissolution in his eyes. And when the rider, behind whom he sat, pointed to a faint spark of light, at no great distance before them, and whispered that it was St. Agnes's Chapel, hard by the inn, he could have cried with the best Catholic of them all, "Inter pontem et fontem, Domine!" Nay, some such words did pass his lips.

For the man before him turned half-way in his saddle. "What?" he asked.

But the Huguenot did not explain.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AT THE KING'S INN.

THE Countess sat up in the darkness of the chamber. She had writhed since noon under the stings of remorse; she could bear them no longer. The slow declension of the day, the evening light, the signs of coming tempest which had driven her company to the shelter of the inn at the cross-roads, all had racked her, by reminding her that the hours were flying, and that soon the fault she had committed would be irreparable. One impulsive attempt to redeem it she had made, we know; but it had failed, and, by rendering her suspect, had made reparation more difficult. Still, by daylight it had seemed possible to rest content with the trial made; not so now, when night had fallen, and the cries of little children and the haggard eyes of mothers peopled the darkness of her chamber. She sat up, and listened with throbbing temples.

To shut out the lightning which played at intervals across the heavens, Madame St. Lo, who shared the room, had covered the window with a cloak; and the place was dark. To exclude the dull roll of the thunder was less easy, for the night was oppressively hot, and behind the cloak the casement was open. Gradually, too, another sound, the hissing fall of heavy rain, began to make itself heard, and to min-

gle with the regular breathing which proved that Madame St. Lo slept.

Assured of this fact, the Countess presently heaved a sigh, and slipped from the bed. She groped in the darkness for her cloak, found it, and donned it over her night-gear. Then, taking her bearings by her bed, which stood with its head to the window and its foot to the entrance, she felt her way across the floor to the door, and after passing her hands a dozen times over every part of it, she found the latch, and raised it. The door creaked, as she pulled it open, and she stood arrested; but the sound went no farther, for the roofed gallery outside, which looked by two windows on the courtyard, was full of outdoor noises, the rushing of rain and the running of spouts and eaves. One of the windows stood wide, admitting the rain and wind, and as she paused, holding the door open, the draught blew the cloak from her. She stepped out quickly and shut the door behind her. On her left was the blind end of the passage; she turned to the right. She took one step into the darkness and stood motionless. Beside her, within a few feet of her, some one had moved, with a dull sound as of a boot on wood; a sound so near her that she held her breath, and pressed herself against the wall.

She listened. Perhaps some of the servants—it was a common usage—had made their beds on the floor. Perhaps one of the women had stirred in the room against the wall of which she crouched. Perhaps—but, even while she reassured herself, the sound rose anew at her feet.

Fortunately at the same instant the glare of the lightning flooded all, and showed the passage, and

showed it empty. It lit up the row of doors on her right and the small windows on her left; and discovered facing her, the door which shut off the rest of the house. She could have thanked—nay, she did thank God for that light. If the sound she had heard recurred she did not hear it; for, as the thunder which followed hard on the flash, crashed overhead and rolled heavily eastwards, she felt her way boldly along the passage, touching first one door, and then a second, and then a third.

She groped for the latch of the last, and found it, but, with her hand on it, paused. In order to summon up her courage, she strove to hear again the cries of misery and to see again the haggard eyes which had driven her hither. And if she did not wholly succeed, other reflections came to her aid. This storm, which covered all smaller noises, and opened, now and again, God's lantern for her use, did it not prove that He was on her side, and that she might count on His protection? The thought at least was timely, and with a better heart she gathered her wits. Waiting until the thunder burst over her head, she opened the door, slid within it, and closed it. She would fain have left it ajar, that in case of need she might escape the more easily. But the wind, which beat into the passage through the open window, rendered the precaution too perilous.

She went forward two paces into the room, and as the roll of the thunder died away she stooped forward and listened with painful intensity for the sound of Count Hannibal's breathing. But the window was open, and the hiss of the rain persisted; she could hear nothing through it, and fearfully she took another step forward. The window should be before

her; the bed in the corner to the left. But nothing of either could she make out. She must wait for the lightning.

It came, and for a second or more the room shone. The window, the low truckle-bed, the sleeper, she saw all with dazzling clearness, and before the flash had well passed she was crouching low, with the hood of her cloak dragged about her face. For the glare had revealed Count Hannibal; but not asleep! He lay on his side, his face towards her; lay with open eyes, staring at her.

Or had the light tricked her? The light must have tricked her, for in the interval between the flash and the thunder, while she crouched quaking, he did not move or call. The light must have deceived her. She felt so certain of it that she found courage to remain where she was until another flash came and showed him sleeping with closed eyes.

She drew a breath of relief at that, and rose slowly to her feet. But she dared not go forward until a third flash had confirmed the second. Then, while the thunder burst overhead and rolled away, she crept on until she stood beside the pillow, and stooping, could hear the sleeper's breathing.

Alas! the worst remained to be done. The packet, she was sure of it, lay under his pillow. How was she to find it, how remove it without rousing him? A touch might awaken him. And yet, if she would not return empty-handed, if she would not go back to the harrowing thoughts which had tortured her through the long hours of the day, it must be done, and done now.

She knew this, yet she hung irresolute a while, blenching before the manual act, listening to the

persistent rush and downpour of the rain. Then a second time she drew courage from the storm. How timely had it broken! How signally had it aided her! How slight had been her chance without it! And so at last, resolutely but with a deft touch, she slid her fingers between the pillow and the bed, slightly pressing down the latter with her other hand. For an instant she fancied that the sleeper's breathing stopped, and her heart gave a great bound. But the breathing went on the next instant—if it had stopped —and dreading the return of the lightning, shrinking from being revealed so near him, and in that act— for which the darkness seemed more fitting — she groped farther, and touched something. And then, as her fingers closed upon it and grasped it, and his breath rose hot to her burning cheek, she knew that the real danger lay in the withdrawal.

At the first attempt he uttered a kind of grunt and moved, throwing out his hand. She thought that he was going to awake, and had hard work to keep herself where she was; but he did not move, and she began again with so infinite a precaution that the perspiration ran down her face and her hair within the hood hung dank on her neck. Slowly, oh so slowly, she drew back the hand, and with it the packet; so slowly, and yet so resolutely, being put to it, that when the dreaded flash surprised her, and she saw his harsh swarthy face, steeped in the mysterious aloofness of sleep, within a hand's breadth of hers, not a muscle of her arm moved, nor did her hand quiver.

It was done—at last! With a burst of gratitude, of triumph, of exultation, she stood erect. She realised that it was done, and that here in her hand

she held the packet. A deep gasp of relief, of joy, of thankfulness, and she glided towards the door.

She groped for the latch, and in the act fancied his breathing was changed. She paused and bent her head to listen. But the patter of the rain, drowning all sounds save those of the nearest origin, persuaded her that she was mistaken, and, finding the latch, she raised it, slipped like a shadow into the passage, and closed the door behind her.

That done she stood arrested, all the blood in her body running to her heart. She must be dreaming! The passage in which she stood—the passage which she had left in black darkness—was alight; was so far lighted, at least, that to eyes fresh from the night, the figures of three men, grouped at the farther end, stood out against the glow of the lantern which they appeared to be trimming—for the two nearest were stooping over it. These two had their backs to her, the third his face; and it was the sight of this third man which had driven the blood to her heart. He ended at the waist! It was only after a few seconds, it was only when she had gazed at him awhile in speechless horror, that he rose another foot from the floor, and she saw that he had paused in the act of ascending through a trapdoor. What the scene meant, who these men were, or what their entrance portended, with these questions her brain refused at the moment to grapple. It was much that—still remembering who might hear her, and what she held—she did not shriek aloud.

Instead, she stood in the gloom at her end of the passage, gazing with all her eyes until she had seen the third man step clear of the trap. She could see him; but the light intervened and blurred his view

of her. He stooped, almost as soon as he had cleared himself, to help up a fourth man, who rose with a naked knife between his teeth. She saw then that all were armed, and something stealthy in their bearing, something cruel in their eyes as the light of the lantern fell now on one dark face and now on another, went to her heart and chilled it. Who were they, and why were they here? What was their purpose? As her reason awoke, as she asked herself these questions, the fourth man stooped in his turn, and gave his hand to a fifth. And on that she lost her self-control and cried out. For the last man to ascend was La Tribe! La Tribe, from whom she had parted that morning!

The sound she uttered was low, but it reached the men's ears, and the two whose backs were towards her turned as if they had been pricked. He who held the lantern raised it, and the five glared at her and she at them. Then a second cry, louder and more full of surprise, burst from her lips. The nearest man, he who held the lantern high that he might view her, was Tignonville, was her lover!

"*Mon Dieu!*" she whispered. "What is it? What is it?"

Then, not till then, did he know her. Until then the light of the lantern had revealed only a cloaked and cowled figure, a gloomy phantom which shook the heart of more than one with superstitious terror. But they knew her now—two of them; and slowly, as in a dream, Tignonville came forward.

The mind has its moments of crisis, in which it acts upon instinct rather than upon reason. The girl never knew why she acted as she did; why she asked no questions, why she uttered no exclama-

tions, no remonstrances. Why, with a finger on her lips and her eyes on his, she put the packet into his hands.

He took it from her, too, as mechanically as she gave it—with the hand which held his bare blade. That done, silent as she, with his eyes set hard, he would have gone by her. The sight of her *there*, guarding the door of him who had stolen her from him, exasperated his worst passions.

But she moved to hinder him, and barred the way. With her hand raised she pointed to the trapdoor. "Go now!" she whispered, her tone stern and low, "you have what you want! Go!"

"No!" And he tried to pass her.

"Go!" she repeated in the same tone. "You have what you need." And still she held her hand extended; still without faltering she faced the five men, while the thunder, growing more distant, rolled sullenly eastward, and the midnight rain, pouring from every spout and dripping eave about the house, wrapped the passage in its sibilant hush. Gradually her eyes dominated his, gradually her nobler nature and nobler aim subdued his weaker parts. For she understood now; and he saw that she did, and had he been alone he would have slunk away, and said no word in his defence.

But one of the men, savage and out of patience, thrust himself between them. "Where is he?" he muttered. "What is the use of this? Where is he?" And his bloodshot eyes — it was Tuez-les-Moines— questioned the doors, while his hand, trembling and shaking on the haft of his knife, bespoke his eagerness. "Where is he? Where is he, woman? Quick, or——"

"I shall not tell you," she answered.

"You lie," he cried, grinning like a dog. "You will tell us! Or we will kill you, too! Where is he? Where is he?"

"I shall not tell you," she repeated, standing before him in the fearlessness of scorn. "Another step and I rouse the house! M. de Tignonville, to you who know me, I swear that if this man does not retire——"

"He is in one of these rooms?" was Tignonville's answer. "In which? In which?"

"Search them!" she answered, her voice low, but biting in its contempt. "Try them. Rouse my women, alarm the house! And when you have his people at your throats—five as they will be to one of you—thank your own mad folly!"

Tuez-les-Moines' eyes glittered. "You will not tell us?" he cried.

"No!"

"Then——"

But as the fanatic sprang on her, La Tribe flung his arms round him and dragged him back. "It would be madness," he cried. "Are you mad, fool? Have done!" he panted, struggling with him. "If madame gives the alarm—and he may be in any one of these four rooms, you cannot be sure which—we are undone." He looked for support to Tignonville, whose movement to protect the girl he had anticipated, and who had since listened sullenly. "We have obtained what we need. Will you requite madame, who has gained it for us at her own risk——"

"It is monsieur I would requite," Tignonville muttered grimly.

"By using violence to her?" the minister retorted passionately. He and Tuez were still gripping one

another. "I tell you, to go on is to risk what we have got! And I for one——"

"Am chicken-hearted!" the young man sneered. "Madame—" he seemed to choke on the word. "Will you swear that he is not here?"

"I swear that if you do not go I will raise the alarm!" she hissed—all their words were sunk to that stealthy note. "Go! if you have not stayed too long already. Go! Or see!" And she pointed to the trapdoor, from which the face and arms of a sixth man had that moment risen—the face dark with perturbation, so that her woman's wit told her at once that something was amiss. "See what has come of your delay already!"

"The water is rising," the man muttered earnestly. "In God's name come, whether you have done it or not, or we cannot pass out again. It is within a foot of the crown of the culvert now, and it is rising."

"Curse on the water!" Tuez-les-Moines answered in a frenzied whisper. "And on this Jezebel. Let us kill her and him! What matter afterwards?" And he tried to shake off La Tribe's grasp.

But the minister held him desperately. "Are you mad? Are you mad?" he answered. "What can we do against thirty? Let us be gone while we can. Let us be gone! Come."

"Ay, come," Perrot cried, assenting reluctantly. He had taken no side hitherto. "The luck is against us! 'Tis no use to-night, man!" And he turned with an air of sullen resignation. Letting his legs drop through the trap he followed the bearer of the tidings out of sight. Another made up his mind to go, and went. Then only Tignonville holding the

lantern, and La Tribe, who feared to release Tuez-les-Moines, remained with the fanatic.

The Countess's eyes met her old lover's, and whether old memories overcame her, or, now that the danger was nearly past, she began to give way, she swayed a little on her feet. But he did not notice it. He was sunk in black rage: rage against her, rage against himself. "Take the light," she muttered unsteadily. "And—and he must follow!"

"And you?"

But she could bear it no longer. "Oh, go," she wailed. "Go! Will you never go? If you love me, if you ever loved me, I implore you to go."

He had betrayed little of a lover's feeling. But he could not resist that appeal, and he turned silently. Seizing Tuez-les-Moines by the other arm, he drew him by force to the trap. "Quiet, fool," he muttered savagely when the man would have resisted, "and go down! If we stay to kill him, we shall have no way of escape, and his life will be dearly bought. Down, man, down!" And between them, in a struggling silence, with now and then an audible rap, or a ring of metal, the two forced the desperado to descend.

La Tribe followed hastily. Tignonville was the last to go. In the act of disappearing he raised his lantern for a last glimpse of the Countess. To his astonishment the passage was empty; she was gone. Hard by him a door stood an inch or two ajar, and he guessed that it was hers, and swore under his breath, hating her at that moment. But he did not guess how nicely she had calculated her strength; how nearly exhaustion had overcome her; or that even while he paused—a fatal pause had he known it—eyeing the dark open-

ing of the door, she lay as one dead, on the bed within. She had fallen in a swoon, from which she did not recover until the sun had risen, and marched across one quarter of the heavens.

Nor did he see another thing, or he might have hastened his steps. Before the yellow light of his lantern faded from the ceiling of the passage, the door of the room farthest from the trap slid open. A man, whose eyes, until darkness swallowed him, shone strangely in a face extraordinarily softened, came out on tip-toe. This man stood awhile, listening. At length, hearing those below utter a cry of dismay, he awoke to sudden activity. He opened with a turn of the key the door which stood at his elbow, the door which led to the other part of the house. He vanished through it. A second later a sharp whistle pierced the darkness of the courtyard and brought a dozen sleepers to their senses and their feet. A moment, and the courtyard hummed with voices, above which one voice rang clear and insistent. With a startled cry the inn awoke.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE COMPANY OF THE BLEEDING HEART.

"But why," Madame St. Lo asked, sticking her arms akimbo, "why stay in this forsaken place a day and a night, when six hours in the saddle would set us in Angers?"

"Because," Tavannes replied coldly—he and his cousin were walking before the gateway of the inn—"the Countess is not well, and will be the better, I think, for staying a day."

"She slept soundly enough! I'll answer for that!"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"She never raised her head this morning, though my women were shrieking 'Murder!' next door, and ——Name of Heaven!" madame resumed, after breaking off abruptly, and shading her eyes with her hand, "what comes here? Is it a funeral? Or a pilgrimage? If all the priests about here are as black, no wonder M. Rabelais fell out with them!"

The inn stood without the walls for the convenience of those who wished to take the road early: a little also, perhaps, because food and forage were cheaper, and the wine paid no town-dues. Four great roads met before the house, along the most easterly of which the sombre company which had caught Madame St. Lo's attention could be seen approaching. At first Count Hannibal supposed with his companion that the travellers were conveying to the grave the corpse

of some person of distinction; for the *cortége* consisted mainly of priests and the like mounted on mules, and clothed for the most part in black. Black also was the small banner which waved above them, and bore in place of arms the emblem of the Bleeding Heart. But a second glance failed to discover either litter or bier; and a nearer approach showed that the travellers, whether they wore the tonsure or not, bore weapons of one kind or another about them.

Suddenly Madame St. Lo clapped her hands, and proclaimed in great astonishment that she knew them. "Why, there is Father Boucher, the Curé of St. Benoist!" she said, "and Father Pezelay of St. Magloire. And there is another I know, though I cannot remember his name! They are preachers from Paris! That is who they are! But what can they be doing here? Is it a pilgrimage, think you?"

"Ay, a pilgrimage of Blood!" Count Hannibal answered between his teeth. And, turning to him to learn what moved him, she saw the look in his eyes which portended a storm. Before she could ask a question, however, the gloomy company, which had first appeared in the distance, moving, an inky blot, through the hot sunshine of the summer morning, had drawn near and was almost abreast of them. Stepping from her side, he raised his hand and arrested the march.

"Who is master here?" he asked haughtily.

"I am the leader," answered a stout pompous Churchman, whose small malevolent eyes belied the sallow fatuity of his face. "I, M. de Tavannes, by your leave."

"And you, by your leave," Tavannes sneered, "are——"

"Archdeacon and Vicar of the Bishop of Angers and Prior of the Lesser Brethren of St. Germain, M. le Comte. Visitor also of the Diocese of Angers," the dignitary continued, puffing out his cheeks, "and Chaplain to the Lieutenant-Governor of Saumur, whose unworthy brother I am."

"A handsome glove, and well embroidered!" Tavannes retorted in a tone of disdain. "The hand I see yonder!" He pointed to the lean parchment mask of Father Pezelay, who coloured ever so faintly, but held his peace under the sneer. "You are bound for Angers?" Count Hannibal continued. "For what purpose, Sir Prior?"

"His Grace the Bishop is absent, and in his absence——"

"You go to fill his city with strife! I know you! Not you!" he continued, contemptuously turning from the Prior, and regarding the third of the principal figures of the party. "But you! You were the Curé who got the mob together last All Souls'."

"I speak the words of Him Who sent me!" answered the third Churchman, whose brooding face and dull curtained eyes gave no promise of the fits of frenzied eloquence which had made his pulpit famous in Paris.

"Then Kill and Burn are His alphabet!" Tavannes retorted, and heedless of the start of horror which a saying so near blasphemy excited among the Churchmen, he turned to Father Pezelay. "And you! You, too, I know!" he continued. "And you know me! And take this from me. Turn, father! Turn! Or worse than a broken head—you bear the scar I see—will befall you. These good persons, whom you have moved, unless I am in error, to take this jour-

ney, may not know me; but you do, and can tell them. If they will to Angers, they must to Angers. But if I find trouble in Angers when I come, I will hang some one high. Don't scowl at me, man!"—in truth, the look of hate in Father Pezelay's eyes was enough to provoke the exclamation. "Some one, and it shall not be a bare patch on the crown will save his windpipe from squeezing!"

A murmur of indignation broke from the preachers' attendants; one or two made a show of drawing their weapons. But Count Hannibal paid no heed to them, and had already turned on his heel when Father Pezelay spurred his mule a pace or two forward. Snatching a heavy brass cross from one of the acolytes, he raised it aloft, and in the voice which had often thrilled the heated congregation of St. Magloire, he called on Tavannes to pause.

"Stand, my lord!" he cried. "And take warning! Stand, reckless and profane, whose face is set hard as a stone, and his heart as a flint, against High Heaven and Holy Church! Stand and hear! Behold the word of the Lord is gone out against this city, even against Angers, for the unbelief thereof! Her place shall be left unto her desolate, and her children shall be dashed against the stones! Woe unto you, therefore, if you gainsay it, or fall short of that which is commanded! You shall perish as Achan, the son of Charmi, and as Saul! The curse that has gone out against you shall not tarry, nor your days continue! For the Canaanitish woman that is in your house, and for the thought that is in your heart, the place that was yours is given to another! Yea, the sword is even now drawn that shall pierce your side!"

"You are more like to split my ears!" Count

Hannibal answered sternly. "And now mark me! Preach as you please here. But a word in Angers, and though you be shaven twice over, I will have you silenced after a fashion which will not please you! If you value your tongue therefore, father——oh, you shake off the dust, do you? Well, pass on! 'Tis wise, perhaps."

And undismayed by the scowling brows, and the cross ostentatiously lifted to heaven, he gazed after the procession as it moved on under its swaying banner, now one and now another of the acolytes looking back and raising his hands to invoke the bolt of Heaven on the blasphemer. As the *cortége* passed the huge watering-troughs, and the open gateway of the inn, the knot of persons congregated there fell on their knees. In answer the Churchmen raised their banner higher, and began to sing the *Eripe me, Domine!* and to its strains, now vengeful, now despairing, now rising on a wave of menace, they passed slowly into the distance, slowly towards Angers and the Loire.

Suddenly Madame St. Lo twitched his sleeve. "Enough for me!" she cried passionately. "I go no farther with you!"

"Ah?"

"No farther!" she repeated. She was pale, she shivered. "Many thanks, my cousin, but we part company here. I do not go to Angers. I have seen horrors enough. I will take my people, and go to my aunt by Tours and the east road. For you, I foresee what will happen. You will perish between the hammer and the anvil."

"Ah?"

"You play too fine a game," she continued, her

face quivering. "Give over the girl to her lover, and send away her people with her. And wash your hands of her and hers. Or you will see her fall, and fall beside her! Give her to him, I say—give her to him!"

"My wife?"

"Wife?" she echoed, for, fickle, and at all times swept away by the emotions of the moment, she was in earnest now. "Is there a tie," and she pointed after the vanishing procession, "that they cannot unloose? That they will not unloose? Is there a life which escapes if they doom it? Did the Admiral escape? Or Rochefoucauld? Or Madame de Luns in old days? I tell you they go to rouse Angers against you, and I see beforehand what will happen. She will perish, and you with her. Wife? A pretty wife, at whose door you took her lover last night."

"And at your door!" he answered quietly, unmoved by the gibe.

But she did not heed. "I warned you of that!" she cried. "And you would not believe me. I told you he was following. And I warn you of this. You are between the hammer and the anvil, M. le Comte! If Tignonville does not murder you in your bed——"

"'Tis not likely while I hold him in my power."

"Then Holy Church will fall on you and crush you. For me, I have seen enough and more than enough. I go to Tours by the east road."

He shrugged his shoulders. "As you please," he said.

She flung away in disgust with him. She could not understand a man who played fast and loose at such a time. The game was too fine for her, its danger too

apparent, the gain too small. She had, too, a woman's dread of the Church, a woman's belief in the power of the dead hand to punish. And in half an hour her orders were given. In two hours her people were gathered, and she departed by the eastward road, three of Tavannes' riders reinforcing her servants for a part of the way. Count Hannibal stood to watch them start, and noticed Bigot riding by the side of Suzanne's mule. He smiled; and presently, as he turned away, he did a thing rare with him—he laughed outright.

A laugh which reflected a mood rare as itself. Few had seen Count Hannibal's eye sparkle as it sparkled now; few had seen him laugh as he laughed, walking to and fro in the sunshine before the inn. His men watched him, and wondered, and liked it little, for one or two who had overheard his altercation with the Churchmen had reported it, and there was shaking of heads over it. The man who had singed the Pope's beard and chucked Cardinals under the chin was growing old, and the most daring of the others had no mind to fight with foes whose weapons were not of this world.

Count Hannibal's gaiety, however, was well grounded, had they known it. He was gay, not because he foresaw peril, and it was his nature to love peril; nor—in the main, though a little, perhaps—because he knew that the woman whose heart he desired to win had that night stood between him and death; nor, though again a little, perhaps, because she had confirmed his choice by conduct which a small man might have deprecated, but which a great man loved; but chiefly, because the events of the night had placed in his grasp two weapons by the aid

of which he looked to recover all the ground he had lost—lost by his impulsive departure from the path of conduct on which he had started.

Those weapons were Tignonville, taken like a rat in a trap by the rising of the water; and the knowledge that the Countess had stolen the precious packet from his pillow. The knowledge—for he had lain and felt her breath upon his cheek, he had lain and felt her hand beneath his pillow, he had lain while the impulse to fling his arms about her had been almost more than he could tame! He had lain and suffered her to go, to pass out safely as she had passed in. And then he had received his reward in the knowledge that, if she robbed him, she robbed him not for herself; and that where it was a question of his life she did not fear to risk her own.

When he came, indeed, to that point, he trembled. How narrowly had he been saved from misjudging her! Had he not lain and waited, had he not possessed himself in patience, he might have been led to think her in collusion with the old lover whom he found at her door, and with those who came to slay him. Either he might have perished unwarned; or escaping that danger, he might have detected her with Tignonville and lost for all time the ideal of a noble woman.

He had escaped that peril. More, he had gained the weapons we have indicated; and the sense of power, in regard to her, almost intoxicated him. Surely if he wielded those weapons to the best advantage, if he strained generosity to the uttermost, the citadel of her heart must yield at last.

He had the defect of his courage and his nature, a tendency to do things after a flamboyant fashion.

He knew that her act would plunge him in perils which he had not foreseen. If the preachers roused the Papists of Angers, if he arrived to find men's swords whetted for the massacre and the men themselves awaiting the signal, then if he did not give that signal there would be trouble. There would be trouble of the kind in which the soul of Hannibal de Tavannes revelled, trouble about the ancient cathedral and under the black walls of the Angevin castle, trouble amid which the hearts of common men would be as water.

Then, when things seemed at their worst, he would reveal his knowledge. Then, when forgiveness must seem impossible, he would forgive. With the flood of peril which she had unloosed rising round them, he would say, "Go!" to the man who had aimed at his life; he would say to her, "I know, and I forgive!" That, that only, would fitly crown the policy on which he had decided from the first, though he had not hoped to conduct it on lines so splendid as those which now dazzled him.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TEMPER.

It was his gaiety, that strange unusual gaiety, still continuing, which on the following day began by perplexing and ended by terrifying the Countess. She could not doubt that he had missed the packet on which so much hung and of which he had indicated the importance. But if he had missed it, why, she asked herself, did he not speak? Why did he not cry the alarm, search and question and pursue? Why did he not give her the opening to tell the truth, without which even her courage failed, her resolution died within her?

Above all, what was the secret of his strange merriment? Of the snatches of song which broke from him, only to be hushed by her look of astonishment? Of the parades which his horse, catching the infection, made under him, as he tossed his riding-cane high in the air and caught it?

Ay, what? Why, when he had suffered so great a loss, when he had been robbed of that of which he must give account—why did he cast off his melancholy and ride like the youngest? She wondered what the men thought, and looking, saw them stare, saw that they watched him stealthily, saw that they laid their heads together. What were they thinking of it? She could not tell; and slowly a terror, more in-

sistent than any to which the extremity of violence would have reduced her, began to grip her heart.

Twenty hours of rest had lifted her from the state of collapse into which the events of the night had cast her; still her limbs at starting had shaken under her. But the cool freshness of the early summer morning, and the sight of the green landscape and the winding Loir, beside which their road ran, had not failed to revive her spirits; and if he had shown himself merely gloomy, merely sunk in revengeful thoughts, or darting hither and thither the glance of suspicion, she felt that she could have faced him, and on the first opportunity could have told him the truth.

But this strange mood veiled she knew not what. It seemed, if she comprehended it at all, the herald of some bizarre, some dreadful vengeance, in harmony with his fierce and mocking spirit. Before it her heart became as water. Even her colour little by little left her cheeks. She knew that he had only to look at her now to read the truth; that it was written in her face, in her shrinking figure, in the eyes which now guiltily sought and now avoided his. And feeling sure that he did read it and know it, she fancied that he licked his lips, as the cat which plays with the mouse; she fancied that he gloated on her terror and her perplexity.

This, though the day and the road were warrants for all cheerful thoughts. On one side vineyards clothed the warm red slopes, and rose in steps from the river to the white buildings of a convent. On the other the stream wound through green flats where the black cattle stood knee-deep in grass, watched by wild-eyed and half-naked youths. Again the travel-

lers lost sight of the Loir, and crossing a shoulder, rode through the dim aisles of a beech-forest, through deep rustling drifts of last year's leaves. And out again and down again they passed, and turning aside from the gateway, trailed along beneath the brown machicolated wall of an old town, from the crumbling battlements of which faces half-sleepy, half-suspicious, watched them as they moved below through the glare and heat. Down to the river-level again, where a squalid anchorite, seated at the mouth of a cave dug in the bank, begged of them, and the bell of a monastery on the farther bank tolled slumberously the hour of Nones.

And still he said nothing, and she, cowed by his mysterious gaiety, yet spurning herself for her cowardice, was silent also. He hoped to arrive at Angers before nightfall. What, she wondered, shivering, would happen there? What was he planning to do to her? How would he punish her? Brave as she was, she was a woman, with a woman's nerves; and fear and anticipation got upon them; and his silence —his silence which must mean a thing worse than words!

And then on a sudden, piercing all, a new thought. Was it possible that he had other letters? If his bearing were consistent with anything, it was consistent with that. Had he other genuine letters, or had he duplicate letters, so that he had lost nothing, but instead had gained the right to rack and torture her, to taunt and despise her?

That thought stung her into sudden self-betrayal. They were riding along a broad dusty track which bordered a stone causey raised above the level of winter floods; impulsively she turned to him. "You

have other letters!" she cried. "You have other letters!" And freed for the moment from her terror, she fixed her eyes on his and strove to read his face.

He looked at her, his mouth grown hard. "What do you mean, madame?" he asked.

"You have other letters?"

"For whom?"

"From the King, for Angers!"

He saw that she was going to confess, that she was going to derange his cherished plan; and unreasonable anger awoke in the man who had been more than willing to forgive a real injury. "Will you explain?" he said between his teeth. And his eyes glittered unpleasantly. "What do you mean?"

"You have other letters," she persisted, "besides those which I stole."

"Which you stole?" He repeated the words without passion. Enraged by this unexpected turn, he hardly knew how to take it.

"Yes, I!" she cried. "I! I took them from under your pillow!"

He was silent a minute. Then he laughed and shook his head. "It will not do, madame," he said, his lip curling. "You are clever, but you do not deceive me."

"Deceive you?"

"Yes."

"You do not believe that I took the letters?" she cried in great amazement.

"No," he answered; "and for a good reason." He had hardened his heart now. He had chosen his line, and he would not spare her.

"Why, then?" she cried. "Why?"

"For the best of all reasons," he answered. "Be-

cause the person who stole the letters was seized in the act of making his escape, and is now in my power."

"The person—who stole the letters?" she faltered.

"Yes, madame."

"Do you mean M. de Tignonville?"

"You have said it."

She turned white to the lips, and trembling could with difficulty sit her horse. With an effort she pulled it up, and he stopped also. Their attendants were some way ahead. "And you have the letters?" she whispered, her eyes meeting his. "You have the letters?"

"No, but I have the thief!" Count Hannibal answered with sinister meaning. "As I think you knew, madame," he continued ironically, "a while back before you spoke."

"I? Oh, no, no!" and she swayed in her saddle. "What—what are you—going to do?" she muttered after a moment's stricken silence.

"To him?"

"Yes."

"The magistrates will decide, at Angers."

"But he did not do it! I swear he did not."

Count Hannibal shook his head coldly.

"I swear, monsieur, I took the letters!" she repeated piteously. "Punish me!" Her figure, bowed like an old woman's over the neck of her horse, seemed to crave his mercy.

Count Hannibal smiled.

"You do not believe me?"

"No," he said. And then, in a tone which chilled her, "If I did believe you," he continued, "I should still punish him!" She was broken; but he would

see if he could not break her further. He would try if there were no weak spot in her armour. He would rack her now, since in the end she must go free. "Understand, madame," he continued in his harshest tone, "I have had enough of your lover. He has crossed my path too often. You are my wife, I am your husband. In a day or two there shall be an end of this farce and of him."

"He did not take them!" she wailed, her face sinking lower on her breast. "He did not take them! Have mercy!"

"Any way, madame, they are gone!" Tavannes answered. "You have taken them between you; and as I do not choose that you should pay, he will pay the price."

If the discovery that Tignonville had fallen into her husband's hands had not sufficed to crush her, Count Hannibal's tone must have done so. The shoot of new life which had raised its head after those dreadful days in Paris, and—for she was young—had supported her under the weight which the peril of Angers had cast on her shoulders, died, bruised under the heel of his brutality. The pride which had supported her, which had won Tavannes' admiration and exacted his respect, sank, as she sank herself, bowed to her horse's neck, weeping bitter tears before him. She abandoned herself to her misery, as she had once abandoned herself in the upper room in Paris.

And he looked at her. He had willed to crush her; he had his will, and he was not satisfied. He had bowed her so low that his magnanimity would now have its full effect, would shine as the sun into a dark world; and yet he was not happy. He could

look forward to the morrow, and say, "She will understand me, she will know me!" and lo, the thought that she wept for her lover stabbed him, and stabbed him anew; and he thought, "Rather would she death from him, than life from me! Though I give her creation, it will not alter her! Though I strike the stars with my head, it is he who fills her world."

The thought spurred him to farther cruelty, impelled him to try if, prostrate as she was, he could not draw a prayer from her? "You don't ask after him?" he scoffed. "He may be before or behind? Or wounded or well? Would you not know, madame? And what message he sent you? And what he fears, and what hope he has? And his last wishes? And—for while there is life there is hope—would you not learn where the key of his prison lies to-night? How much for the key to-night, madame?"

Each question fell on her like the lash of a whip; but as one who has been flogged into insensibility, she did not wince. That drove him on: he felt a mad desire to hear her prayers, to force her lower, to bring her to her knees. And he sought about for a keener taunt. Their attendants were almost out of sight before them; the sun, declining apace, was in their eyes. "In two hours we shall be in Angers," he said. "Mon Dieu, madame, it was a pity, when you two were taking letters, you did not go a step farther. You were surprised, or I doubt if I should be alive to-day!"

Then she did look up. She raised her head and met his gaze with such wonder in her eyes, such reproach in her tear-stained face, that his voice sank on the last word. "You mean—that I would have mur-

dered you?" she said. "I would have cut off my hand first. What I did"—and now her voice was as firm as it was low—"what I did, I did to save my people. And if it were to be done again, I would do it again!"

"You dare to tell me that to my face?" he cried, hiding feelings which almost choked him. "You would do it again, would you? Mon Dieu, madame, you need to be taught a lesson!"

And by chance, meaning only to make the horses move on again, he raised his whip. She thought that he was going to strike her, and she flinched at last. The whip fell smartly on her horse's quarters, and it sprang forward. Count Hannibal swore between his teeth.

He had turned pale, she red as fire. "Get on! Get on!" he cried harshly. "We are falling behind!" And riding at her heels, flipping her horse now and then, he forced her to trot on until they overtook the servants.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE BLACK TOWN.

It was late evening when, riding wearily on jaded horses, they came to the outskirts of Angers, and saw before them the term of their journey. The glow of sunset had faded, but the sky was still warm with the last hues of day; and against its opal light the huge mass of the Angevin castle, which even in sunshine rises dark and forbidding above the Mayenne, stood up black and sharply defined. Below it, on both banks of the river, the towers and spires of the city soared up from a sombre huddle of ridge-roofs, broken here by a round-headed gateway, crumbling and pigeon-haunted, that dated from St. Louis, and there by the gaunt arms of a windmill.

The city lay dark under a light sky, keeping well its secrets. Thousands were out of doors enjoying the evening coolness in alley and court, yet it betrayed the life which pulsed in its arteries only by the low murmur which rose from it. Nevertheless, the Countess at sight of its roofs tasted the first moment of happiness which had been hers that day. She might suffer, but she had saved. Those roofs would thank her! In that murmur were the voices of women and children she had redeemed! At the sight and at the thought a wave of love and tenderness swept all bitterness from her breast. A profound humility, a boundless thankfulness took pos-

session of her. Her head sank lower above her horse's mane; but it sank in reverence, not in shame.

Could she have known what was passing beneath those roofs which night was blending in a common gloom—could she have read the thoughts which at that moment paled the cheeks of many a stout burgher, whose gabled house looked on the great square, she had been still more thankful. For in attics and back rooms women were on their knees at that hour, praying with feverish eyes; and in the streets men—on whom their fellows, seeing the winding-sheet already at the chin, gazed askance—smiled, and showed brave looks abroad, while their hearts were sick with fear.

For darkly, no man knew how, the news had come to Angers. It had been known, more or less, for three days. Men had read it in other men's eyes. The tongue of a scold, the sneer of an injured woman had spread it, the birds of the air had carried it. From garret window to garret window across the narrow lanes of the old town it had been whispered at dead of night; at convent grilles, and in the timber-yards beside the river. Ten thousand, fifty thousand, a hundred thousand, it was rumoured, had perished in Paris. In Orleans, all. In Tours this man's sister; at Saumur that man's son. Through France the word had gone forth that the Huguenots must die; and in the busy town the same roof-tree sheltered fear and hate, rage and cupidity. On one side of the party-wall murder lurked fierce-eyed; on the other, the victim lay watching the latch, and shaking at a step. Strong men tasted the bitterness of death, and women clasping their babes to their breasts smiled sickly into children's eyes.

The signal only was lacking. It would come, said some, from Saumur, where Montsoreau, the Duke of Anjou's Lieutenant-Governor and a Papist, had his quarters. From Paris, said others, directly from the King. It might come at any hour now, in the day or in the night; the magistrates, it was whispered, were in continuous session, awaiting its coming. No wonder that from lofty gable windows, and from dormers set high above the tiles, haggard faces looked northward and eastward, and ears sharpened by fear imagined above the noises of the city the ring of the iron shoes that carried doom.

Doubtless the majority desired—as the majority in France have always desired — peace. But in the purlieus about the cathedral and in the lanes where the sacristans lived, in convent parlours and college courts, among all whose livelihood the new faith threatened, was a stir as of a hive deranged. Here was grumbling against the magistrates—why wait? There, stealthy plannings and arrangements; everywhere a grinding of weapons and casting of slugs. Old grudges, new rivalries, a scholar's venom, a priest's dislike, here was final vent for all. None need leave this feast unsated!

It was a man of this class, sent out for the purpose, who first espied Count Hannibal's company approaching. He bore the news into the town, and by the time the travellers reached the city gate, the dusky street within, on which lights were beginning to twinkle from booths and casements, was alive with figures running to meet them and crying the news as they ran. The travellers, weary and road-stained, had no sooner passed under the arch than they found themselves the core of a great crowd which moved

with them and pressed about them; now unbonneting, and now calling out questions, and now shouting "Vive le Roi! Vive le Roi!" Above the press, windows burst into light; and over all, the quaint leaning gables of the old timbered houses looked down on the hurry and tumult.

They passed along a narrow street in which the rabble, hurrying at Count Hannibal's bridle, and often looking back to read his face, had much ado to escape harm; along this street and before the yawning doors of a great church, whence a hot breath heavy with incense and burning wax issued to meet them. A portion of the congregation had heard the tumult and struggled out, and now stood close-packed on the steps under the double vault of the portal. Among them the Countess's eyes, as she rode by, a sturdy man-at-arms on either hand, caught and held one face. It was the face of a tall, lean man in dusty black; and though she did not know him she seemed to have an equal attraction for him; for as their eyes met he seized the shoulder of the man next him and pointed her out. And something in the energy of the gesture, or in the thin lips and malevolent eyes of the man who pointed, chilled the Countess's blood and shook her, she knew not why.

Until then, she had known no fear save of her husband. But at that a sense of the force and pressure of the crowd—as well as of the fierce passions, straining about her, which a word might unloose—broke upon her; and looking to the stern men on either side she fancied that she read anxiety in their faces.

She glanced behind. Bridle to bridle the Count's men came on, pressing round her women and shield-

ing them from the exuberance of the throng. In their faces too she thought that she traced uneasiness.

What wonder if the scenes through which she had passed in Paris began to recur to her mind, and shook nerves already overwrought?

She began to tremble. "Is there—danger?" she muttered, speaking in a low voice to Bigot, who rode on her right hand. "Will they do anything?"

The Norman snorted. "Not while he is in the saddle," he said, nodding towards his master, who rode a pace in front of them, his reins loose. "There be some here know him!" Bigot continued, in his drawling tone. "And more will know him if they break line. Have no fear, madame, he will bring you safe to the inn. Down with the Huguenots?" he continued, turning from her and addressing a rogue who, holding his stirrup, was shouting the cry till he was crimson. "Then why not away, and——"

"The King! The King's word and leave!" the man answered.

"Ay, tell us!" shrieked another, looking upward, while he waved his cap; "have we the King's leave?"

"You'll bide *his* leave!" the Norman retorted, indicating the Count with his thumb. "Or 'twill be up with you—on the three-legged horse!"

"But he comes from the King!" the man panted.

"To be sure. To be sure!"

"Then——"

"You'll bide his time! That's all!" Bigot answered, rather it seemed for his own satisfaction than the other's enlightenment. "You'll all bide it, you dogs!" he continued in his beard, as he cast his eye

over the weltering crowd. "Ha! so we are here, are we? And not too soon, either."

He fell silent as they entered an open space, overlooked on one side by the dark façade of the cathedral, on the other three sides by houses more or less illumined. The rabble swept into this open space with them and before them, filled much of it in an instant, and for a while eddied and swirled this way and that, thrust onward by the worshippers who had issued from the church and backwards by those who had been first in the square, and had no mind to be hustled out of hearing. A stranger, confused by the sea of excited faces, and deafened by the clamour of "Vive le Roi!" "Vive Anjou!" mingled with cries against the Huguenots, might have fancied that the whole city was arrayed before him. But he would have been wide of the mark. The scum, indeed—and a dangerous scum—frothed and foamed and spat under Tavannes' bridle-hand; and here and there among them, but not of them, the dark-robed figure of a priest moved to and fro; or a Benedictine, or some smooth-faced acolyte egged on to the work he dared not do. But the decent burghers were not there. They lay bolted in their houses; while the magistrates, with little heart to do aught except bow to the mob—or other their masters for the time being—shook in their council chamber.

There is not a city of France which has not seen it; which has not known the moment when the mass impended, and it lay with one man to start it or stay its course. Angers within its houses heard the clamour, and from the child, clinging to its mother's skirt, and wondering why she wept, to the Provost, trembled, believing that the hour had come. The Countess

heard it too, and understood it. She caught the savage note in the voice of the mob—that note which means danger—and her heart beating wildly she looked to her husband. Then, fortunately for her, fortunately for Angers, it was given to all to see that in Count Hannibal's saddle sat a man.

He raised his hand for silence, and in a minute or two—not at once, for the square was dusky—it was obtained. He rose in his stirrups, and bared his head.

"I am from the King!" he cried, throwing his voice to all parts of the crowd. "And this is his Majesty's pleasure and good will! That every man hold his hand until to-morrow on pain of death, or worse! And at noon his further pleasure will be known! Vive le Roi!"

And he covered his head again.

"Vive le Roi!" cried a number of the foremost. But their shouts were feeble and half-hearted, and were quickly drowned in a rising murmur of discontent and ill-humour, which, mingled with cries of "Is that all? Is there no more? Down with the Huguenots!" rose from all parts. Presently these cries became merged in a persistent call, which had its origin, as far as could be discovered, in the darkest corner of the square. A call for "Montsoreau! Montsoreau! Give us Montsoreau!"

With another man, or had Tavannes turned or withdrawn, or betrayed the least anxiety, words had become actions, disorder a riot; and that in the twinkling of an eye. But Count Hannibal, sitting his horse, with his handful of riders behind him, watched the crowd, as little moved by it as the Armed Knight of Notre Dame. Only once did he

say a word. Then, raising his hand as before to gain a hearing, "You ask for Montsoreau?" he thundered. "You will have Montfaucon if you do not quickly go to your homes!"

At which, and at the glare of his eye, the more timid took fright. Feeling his gaze upon them, seeing that he had no intention of withdrawing, they began to sneak away by ones and twos. Soon others missed them and took the alarm, and followed. A moment and scores were streaming away through lanes and alleys and along the main street. At last the bolder and more turbulent found themselves a remnant. They glanced uneasily at one another and at Tavannes, took fright in their turn, and plunging into the current hastened away, raising now and then as they passed through the streets a cry of "Vive Montsoreau! Montsoreau!"—which was not without its menace for the morrow.

Count Hannibal waited motionless until no more than half a dozen groups remained in the open. Then he gave the word to dismount; so far, even the Countess and her women had kept their saddles, lest the movement which their retreat into the inn must have caused should be misread by the mob. Last of all he dismounted himself, and with lights going before him and behind, and preceded by Bigot, bearing his cloak and pistols, he escorted the Countess into the house. Not many minutes had elapsed since he called for silence; but long before he reached the chamber looking over the square from the first floor, in which supper was being set for them, the news had flown through the length and breadth of Angers that for this night the danger was past. The hawk had come to Angers, and lo! it was a dove.

Count Hannibal strode to one of the open windows and looked out. In the room, which was well lighted, were people of the house, going to and fro, setting out the table; to Madame, standing beside the hearth—which held its summer dressing of green boughs—while her woman held water for her to wash, the scene recalled with painful vividness the meal at which she had been present on the morning of the St. Bartholomew—the meal which had ushered in her troubles. Naturally her eyes went to her husband, her mind to the horror in which she had held him then; and with a kind of shock, perhaps because the last few minutes had shown him in a new light, she compared her old opinion of him with that which, much as she feared him, she now entertained.

This afternoon, if ever, within the last few hours, if at all, he had acted in a way to justify that horror and that opinion. He had treated her—brutally; he had insulted and threatened her, had almost struck her. And yet—and yet Madame felt that she had moved so far from the point which she had once occupied that the old attitude was hard to understand. Hardly could she believe that it was on this man, much as she still dreaded him, that she had looked with those feelings of repulsion.

She was still gazing at him with eyes which strove to see two men in one, when he turned from the window. Absorbed in thought she had forgotten her occupation, and stood, the towel suspended in her half-dried hands. Before she knew what he was doing he was at her side; he bade the woman hold the bowl, and he rinsed his hands. Then he turned, and without looking at the Countess, he dried his hands on the farther end of the towel which she was still using.

She blushed faintly. A something in the act, more intimate and more familiar than had ever marked their intercourse, set her blood running strangely. When he turned away and bade Bigot unbuckle his spur-leathers, she stepped forward.

"I will do it!" she murmured, acting on a sudden and unaccountable impulse. And as she knelt, she shook her hair about her face to hide its colour.

"Nay, madame, but you will soil your fingers!" he said coldly.

"Permit me," she muttered half coherently. And though her fingers shook, she pursued and performed her task.

When she rose he thanked her; and then the devil in the man, or the Nemesis he had provoked when he took her by force from another—the Nemesis of jealousy, drove him to spoil all. "And for whose sake, madame?" he added with a jeer—"mine or M. de Tignonville's?" And with a glance between jest and earnest, he tried to read her thoughts.

She winced as if he had indeed struck her, and the hot colour fled her cheeks. "For his sake!" she said, with a shiver of pain. "That his life may be spared!" And she stood back humbly, like a beaten dog. Though, indeed, it was for the sake of Angers, in thankfulness for the past rather than in any desperate hope of propitiating her husband, that she had done it!

Perhaps he would have withdrawn his words. But before he could answer, the host, bowing to the floor, came to announce that all was ready, and that the Provost of the City, for whom M. le Comte had sent, was in waiting below. "Let him come up!" Tavannes answered, grave and frowning. "And see you,

close the room, sirrah! My people will wait on us. Ah!" as the Provost, a burly man with a face framed for jollity, but now pale and long, entered and approached him with many salutations. "How comes it, M. le Prévôt—you are the Prévôt, are you not?"

"Yes, M. le Comte."

"How comes it that so great a crowd is permitted to meet in the streets? And that at my entrance, though I come unannounced, I find half of the city gathered together?"

The Provost stared. "Respect, M. le Comte," he said, "for His Majesty's letters, of which you are the bearer, no doubt induced some to come together——"

"Who said I brought letters?"

"Who——"

"Who said I brought letters?" Count Hannibal repeated in a strenuous voice. And he ground his chair half about and faced the astonished magistrate. "Who said I brought letters?"

"Why, my lord," the Provost stammered, "it was everywhere yesterday——"

"Yesterday?"

"Last night, at latest—that letters were coming from the King."

"By my hand?"

"By your lordship's hand—whose name is so well known here," the magistrate added, in the hope of clearing the great man's brow.

Count Hannibal laughed darkly. "My hand will be better known by-and-by," he said. "See you, sirrah, there is some practice here. What is this cry of Montsoreau that I hear?"

"Your lordship knows that he is His Grace's Lieutenant-Governor in Saumur."

"I know that, man. But is he here?"

"He was at Saumur yesterday, and 'twas rumoured three days back that he was coming here to extirpate the Huguenots. Then word came of your lordship and of His Majesty's letters, and 'twas thought that M. de Montsoreau would not come, his authority being superseded."

"I see. And now your rabble think that they would prefer M. Montsoreau. That is it, is it?"

The magistrate shrugged his shoulders and opened his hands. "Pigs!" he said. And having spat on the floor he looked apologetically at the lady. "True pigs!"

"What connections has he here?" Tavannes asked.

"He is a brother of my lord the Bishop's Vicar, who arrived yesterday."

"With a rout of shaven heads who have been preaching and stirring up the town!" Count Hannibal cried, his face growing red. "Speak, man, is it so? But I'll be sworn it is!"

"There has been preaching," the Provost answered reluctantly.

"Montsoreau may count his brother, then, for one. He is a fool, but with a knave behind him, and a knave who has no cause to love us! And the Castle? 'Tis held by one of M. de Montsoreau's creatures, I take it?"

"Yes, my lord."

"With what force?"

The magistrate shrugged his shoulders, and looked doubtfully at Badelon, who was keeping the door.

Tavannes followed the glance with his usual impatience. "Mon Dieu, you need not look at him!" he cried. "He has sacked St. Peter's and singed the

Pope's beard with a holy candle! He has been served on the knee by Cardinals; and is Turk or Jew, or monk or Huguenot as I please. And madame"—for the Provost's astonished eyes, after resting awhile on the old soldier's iron visage, had passed to her—"is Huguenot, so you need have no fear of her! There, speak, man," with impatience, "and cease to think of your own skin!"

The Provost drew a deep breath, and fixed his small eyes on Count Hannibal.

"If I knew, my lord, what you—why, my own sister's son"—he paused, his face began to work, his voice shook—"is a Huguenot! Ay, my lord, a Huguenot! And they know it!" he continued, a flush of rage augmenting the emotion which his countenance betrayed. "Ay, they know it! And they push me on at the Council, and grin behind my back; Lescot, who was Provost two years back and would match his son with my daughter; and Thuriot who prints for the University! They nudge one another, and egg me on, till half the city thinks it is I who would kill the Huguenots! I!" Again his voice broke. "And my own sister's son a Huguenot! And my girl at home white-faced for—for his sake."

Tavannes scanned the man shrewdly. "Perhaps she is of the same way of thinking?" he said.

The Provost started, and lost one-half of his colour. "God forbid!" he cried, "saving madame's presence! Who says so, my lord, lies!"

"Ay, lies not far from the truth."

"My lord!"

"Pish, man, Lescot has said it and will act on it. And Thuriot, who prints for the University! Would you 'scape them? You would? Then listen to me.

I want but two things. First, how many men has Montsoreau's fellow in the Castle? Few, I know, for he is a niggard, and if he spends, he spends the Duke's pay."

"Twelve. But five can hold it."

"Ay, but twelve dare not leave it! Let them stew in their own broth! And now for the other matter. See, man, that before daybreak three gibbets, with a ladder and two ropes apiece, are set up in the square. And let one be before this door. You understand? Then let it be done! The rest," he added with a ferocious smile, "you may leave to me."

The magistrate nodded rather feebly. "Doubtless," he said, his eye wandering here and there, "there are rogues in Angers. And for rogues the gibbet! But saving your presence, my lord, it is a question whether——"

But M. de Tavannes' patience was exhausted. "Will you do it?" he roared. "That is the question. And the only question."

The Provost jumped, he was so startled. "Certainly, my lord, certainly!" he muttered humbly. "Certainly, I will!" And bowing frequently, but saying no more, he backed himself out of the room.

Count Hannibal laughed grimly after his fashion, and doubtless thought that he had seen the last of the magistrate for that night. Great was his wrath therefore, when, less than a minute later—and before Bigot had carved for him—the door opened and the Provost appeared again. He slid in, and without giving the courage he had gained on the stairs time to cool, plunged into his trouble.

"It stands this way, M. le Comte," he bleated. "If I put up the gibbets and a man is hanged, and you

have letters from the King, 'tis a rogue the less and no harm done. But if you have no letters from His Majesty, then it is on my shoulders they will put it, and 'twill be odd if they do not find a way to hang me to right him."

Count Hannibal smiled grimly. "And your sister's son?" he sneered. "And your girl who is white-faced for his sake, and may burn on the same bonfire with him? And——"

"Mercy! Mercy!" the wretched Provost cried. And he wrung his hands. "Lescot and Thuriot——"

"Perhaps we may hang Lescot and Thuriot——"

"But I see no way out," the Provost babbled. "No way! No way!"

"I am going to show you one," Tavannes retorted. "If the gibbets are not in place by sunrise, I shall hang you from this window. That is one way out; and you'll be wise to take the other! For the rest and for your comfort, if I have no letters, it is not always to paper that the King commits his inmost heart."

The magistrate bowed. He quaked, he doubted, but he had no choice. "My lord," he said, "I put myself in your hands. It shall be done, certainly it shall be done. But, but——" and shaking his head in foreboding he turned to the door.

At the last moment, when he was within a pace of it, the Countess rose impulsively to her feet. She called to him. "M. le Prévôt, a minute, if you please," she said. "There may be trouble to morrow; your daughter may be in some peril. You will do well to send her to me. My lord"—and on the word her voice, timid before, grew full and steady—"will see that I am safe. And she will be safe with me."

The Provost saw before him only a gracious lady, moved by a thoughtfulness unusual in persons of her rank. He was at no pains to explain the flame in her cheek, or the soft light which glowed in her eyes, as she looked at him, across her formidable husband. He was only profoundly grateful — moved even to tears. Humbly thanking her he accepted her offer for his child, and withdrew wiping his eyes.

When he was gone, and the door had closed behind him, Tavannes turned to the Countess, who still kept her feet. "You are very confident this evening," he sneered. "Gibbets do not frighten you, it seems, madame. Perhaps if you knew for whom the one before the door is intended?"

She met his look with a searching gaze, and spoke with a ring of defiance in her tone. "I do not believe it!" she said. "I do not believe it! You who save Angers will not destroy him!" And then her woman's mood changing, with courage and colour ebbing together, "Oh, no, you will not! You will not!" she wailed. And she dropped on her knees before him, and holding up her clasped hands, "God will put it in your heart to spare him—and me!"

He rose with a stifled oath, took two steps from her, and in a tone hoarse and constrained, "Go!" he said. "Go, or sit! Do you hear, madame? You try my patience too far!"

But when she had gone his face was radiant. He had brought her, he had brought all, to the point at which he aimed. To-morrow his triumph awaited him. To-morrow he who had cast her down would raise her up.

He did not foresee what a day would bring forth.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN THE LITTLE CHAPTER-HOUSE.

THE sun was an hour high, and in Angers the shops and booths, after the early fashion of the day, were open or opening. Through all the gates country folk were pressing into the gloomy streets of the Black Town with milk and fruit; and at doors and windows housewives cheapened fish, or chaffered over the fowl for the pot. For men must eat, though there be gibbets in the Place Ste.-Croix: gaunt gibbets, high and black and twofold, each, with its dangling ropes, like a double note of interrogation.

But gibbets must eat also; and between ground and noose was so small a space in those days that a man dangled almost before he knew it. The sooner, then, the paniers were empty, and the clown, who pays for all, was beyond the gates, the better he, for one, would be pleased. In the market, therefore, was hurrying. Men cried their wares in lowered voices, and tarried but a little for the oldest customer. The bargain struck, the more timid among the buyers hastened to shut themselves into their houses again; the bolder, who ventured to the Place to confirm the rumour with their eyes, talked in corners and in lanes, avoided the open, and eyed the sinister preparations from afar. The shadow of the things which stood before the cathedral affronting the sunlight with their gaunt black shapes lay across the length and breadth

of Angers. Even in the corners where men whispered, even in the cloisters where men bit their nails in impotent anger, the stillness of fear ruled all. Whatever Count Hannibal had it in his mind to tell the city, it seemed unlikely—and hour by hour it seemed less likely—that any would contradict him.

He knew this as he walked in the sunlight before the inn, his spurs ringing on the stones as he made each turn, his movements watched by a hundred peering eyes. After all, it was not hard to rule, nor to have one's way in this world. But then, he went on to remember, not everyone had his self-control, or that contempt for the weak and unsuccessful which lightly took the form of mercy. He held Angers safe, curbed by his gibbets. With M. de Montsoreau he might have trouble; but the trouble would be slight, for he knew Montsoreau, and what it was the Lieutenant-Governor valued above profitless bloodshed.

He might have felt less confident had he known what was passing at that moment in a room off the small cloister of the Abbey of St. Aubin, a room known at Angers as the Little Chapter-House. It was a long chamber with a groined roof and stone walls, panelled as high as a tall man might reach with dark chestnut wood. Gloomily lighted by three grated windows, which looked on a small inner green, the last resting-place of the Benedictines, the room itself seemed at first sight no more than the last resting-place of worn-out odds and ends. Piles of thin sheepskin folios, dog's-eared and dirty, the rejected of the choir, stood against the walls; here and there among them lay a large brass-bound tome on which

the chains that had fettered it to desk or lectern still rusted. A broken altar cumbered one corner: a stand bearing a curious — and rotting — map filled another. In the other two corners a medley of faded scutcheons and banners, which had seen their last Toussaint procession, mouldered slowly into dust— into much dust. The air of the room was full of it.

In spite of which the long oak table that filled the middle of the chamber shone with use: so did the great metal standish which it bore. And though the seven men who sat about the table seemed, at a first glance and in that gloomy light, as rusty and faded as the rubbish behind them, it needed but a second look at their lean jaws and hungry eyes to be sure of their vitality.

He who sat in the great chair at the end of the table was indeed rather plump than thin. His white hands, gay with rings, were well cared for; his peevish chin rested on a falling-collar of lace worthy of a Cardinal. But though the Bishop's Vicar was heard with deference, it was noticeable that when he had ceased to speak his hearers looked to the priest on his left, to Father Pezelay, and waited to hear his opinion before they gave their own. The Father's energy, indeed, had dominated the Angevins, clerks and townsfolk alike, as it had dominated the Parisian *dévotes* who knew him well. The vigour which hate inspires passes often for solid strength; and he who had seen with his own eyes the things done in Paris spoke with an authority to which the more timid quickly and easily succumbed.

Yet gibbets are ugly things; and Thuriot, the printer, whose pride had been tickled by a summons to the conclave, began to wonder if he had done wisely

in coming. Lescot, too, who presently ventured a word. "But if M. de Tavannes' order be to do nothing," he began doubtfully, "you would not, reverend Father, have us resist His Majesty's will?"

"God forbid, my friend!" Father Pezelay answered with unction. "But His Majesty's will is to do—to do for the glory of God and the saints and His Holy Church! How? Is that which was lawful at Saumur unlawful here? Is that which was lawful at Tours unlawful here? Is that which the King did in Paris—to the utter extermination of the unbelieving and the purging of that Sacred City—against his will here? Nay, his will is to do—to do as they have done in Paris and in Tours and in Saumur! But his Minister is unfaithful! The woman whom he has taken to his bosom has bewildered him with her charms and her sorceries, and put it in his mind to deny the mission he bears."

"You are sure, beyond chance of error, that he bears letters to that effect, good Father?" the printer ventured.

"Ask my lord's Vicar! He knows the letters and the import of them!"

"They are to that effect," the Archdeacon answered, drumming on the table with his fingers and speaking somewhat sullenly. "I was in the Chancellery and I saw them. They are duplicates of those sent to Bordeaux."

"Then the preparations he has made must be against the Huguenots," Lescot, the ex-Provost, said with a sigh of relief. And Thuriot's face lightened also. "He must intend to hang one or two of the ringleaders, before he deals with the herd."

"Think it not!" Father Pezelay cried in his high

shrill voice. "I tell you the woman has bewitched him, and he will deny his letters!"

For a moment there was silence. Then, "But dare he do that, reverend Father?" Lescot asked slowly and incredulously. "What? Suppress the King's letters?"

"There is nothing he will not dare! There is nothing he has not dared!" the priest answered vehemently; the recollection of the scene in the great guard-room of the Louvre, when Tavannes had so skilfully turned the tables on him, instilling venom into his tone. "She who lives with him is the devil's. She has bewitched him with her spells and her Sabbaths! She bears the mark of the Beast on her bosom, and for her the fire is even now kindling!"

The laymen who were present shuddered. The two canons who faced them crossed themselves, muttering "Avaunt, Satan!"

"It is for you to decide," the priest continued, gazing on them passionately, "whether you will side with him or with the Angel of God! For I tell you it was none other executed the divine judgments at Paris! It was none other but the Angel of God held the sword at Tours! It is none other holds the sword here! Are you for him or against him? Are you for him, or for the woman with the mark of the Beast? Are you for God or against God? For the hour draws near! The time is at hand! You must choose! You must choose!" And, striking the table with his hand, he leaned forward, and with glittering eyes fixed each of them in turn, as he cried, "You must choose! You must choose!" He came to the Archdeacon last.

The Bishop's Vicar fidgeted in his chair, his face a

shade more sallow, his cheeks hanging a trifle more loosely, than ordinary. "If my brother were here!" he muttered. "If M. de Montsoreau had arrived!"

But Father Pezelay knew whose will would prevail if Montsoreau met Tavannes at his leisure. To force Montsoreau's hand, to surround him on his first entrance with a howling mob already committed to violence, to set him at their head and pledge him before he knew with whom he had to do—this had been, this still was, the priest's design.

But how was he to pursue it while those gibbets stood? While their shadows lay even on the chapter table, and darkened the faces of his most forward associates? That for a moment staggered the priest; and had not private hatred, ever renewed by the touch of the scar on his brow, fed the fire of bigotry he had yielded, as the rabble of Angers were yielding, reluctant and scowling, to the hand which held the city in its grip. But to have come so far on the wings of hate, and to do nothing! To have come avowedly to preach a crusade, and to sneak away cowed! To have dragged the Bishop's Vicar hither, and fawned and cajoled and threatened by turns—and for nothing! These things were passing bitter—passing bitter, when the morsel of vengeance he had foreseen smacked so sweet on the tongue.

For it was no common vengeance, no layman's vengeance, coarse and clumsy, which the priest had imagined in the dark hours of the night, when his feverish brain kept him wakeful. To see Count Hannibal roll in the dust had gone but a little way towards satisfying him. No! But to drag from his arms the woman for whom he had sinned, to subject her to shame and torture in the depths of some con-

vent, and finally to burn her as a witch—it was that which had seemed to the priest in the night hours a vengeance sweet in the mouth.

But the thing seemed unattainable in the circumstances. The city was cowed; the priest knew that no dependence was to be placed on Montsoreau, whose vice was avarice and whose object was plunder. To the Archdeacon's feeble words, therefore, "We must look," the priest retorted sternly, "not to M. de Montsoreau, reverend Father, but to the pious of Angers! We must cry in the streets, 'They do violence to God! They wound God and His Mother!' And so, and so only, shall the unholy thing be rooted out!"

"Amen!" the Curé of St.-Benoist muttered, lifting his head; and his dull eyes glowed awhile. "Amen! Amen!" Then his chin sank again upon his breast.

But the canons of Angers looked doubtfully at one another, and timidly at the speakers; the meat was too strong for them. And Lescot and Thuriot shuffled in their seats. At length, "I do not know," Lescot muttered timidly.

"You do not know?"

"What can be done!"

"The people will know!" Father Pezelay retorted. "Trust them!"

"But the people will not rise without a leader."

"Then will I lead them!"

"Even so, reverend Father—I doubt," Lescot faltered. And Thuriot nodded assent. Gibbets were erected in those days rather for laymen than for the Church.

"You doubt!" the priest cried. "You doubt!" His baleful eyes passed from one to the other; from

them to the rest of the company. He saw that with the exception of the Curé of St.-Benoist all were of a mind. "You doubt! Nay, but I see what it is! It is this," he continued slowly and in a different tone, "the King's will goes for nothing in Angers! His writ runs not here. And Holy Church cries in vain for help against the oppressor. I tell you, the sorceress who has bewitched him has bewitched you also. Beware! beware, therefore, lest it be with you as with him! And the fire that shall consume her, spare not your houses!"

The two citizens crossed themselves, grew pale and shuddered. The fear of witchcraft was great in Angers, the peril, if accused of it, enormous. Even the canons looked startled. "If—if my brother were here," the Archdeacon repeated feebly, "something might be done!"

"Vain is the help of man!" the priest retorted sternly, and with a gesture of sublime dismissal. "I turn from you to a mightier than you!" And, leaning his head on his hands, he covered his face.

The Archdeacon and the churchmen looked at him, and from him their scared eyes passed to one another. Their one desire now was to be quit of the matter, to have done with it, to escape; and one by one with the air of whipped curs they rose to their feet, and in a hurry to be gone muttered a word of excuse shamefacedly and got themselves out of the room. Lescot and the printer were not slow to follow, and in less than a minute the two strange preachers, the men from Paris, remained the only occupants of the chamber; save, to be precise, a lean official in rusty black, who throughout the conference had sat by the door.

Until the last shuffling footstep had ceased to sound in the still cloister no one spoke. Then Father Pezelay looked up, and the eyes of the two priests met in a long gaze. "What think you?" Pezelay muttered at last.

"Wet hay," the other answered dreamily, "is slow to kindle, yet burns if the fire be big enough. At what hour does he state his will?"

"At noon."

"In the Council Chamber?"

"It is so given out."

"It is three hundred yards from the Place Ste.-Croix and he must go guarded," the Curé of St.-Benoist continued in the same dull fashion. "He cannot leave many in the house with the woman. If it were attacked in his absence——"

"He would return, and——" Father Pezelay shook his head, his cheek turned a shade paler. Clearly, he saw with his mind's eye more than he expressed.

"*Hoc est corpus,*" the other muttered, his dreamy gaze on the table. "If he met us then, on his way to the house, and we had bell, book, and candle, would he stop?"

"He would not stop!" Father Pezelay rejoined.

"He would not?"

"I know the man!"

"Then——" but the rest St.-Benoist whispered, his head drooping forward; whispered so low that even the lean man behind him, listening with greedy ears, failed to follow the meaning of his superior's words. But that he spoke plainly enough for his hearer Father Pezelay's face was witness. Astonishment, fear, hope, triumph, the lean pale face reflected all in turn; and, underlying all, a subtle malignant mis-

chief, as if a devil's eyes peeped through the holes in an opera mask.

When the other was at last silent Pezelay drew a deep breath. "'Tis bold! Bold! Bold!" he muttered. "But have you thought? He who bears the——"

"Brunt?" the other whispered with a chuckle. "He may suffer? Yes, but it will not be you or I! No, he who was last here shall be first there! The Archdeacon-Vicar—if we can persuade him—who knows but that even for him the crown of martyrdom is reserved?" The dull eyes flickered with unholy amusement.

"And the alarm that brings him from the Council Chamber?"

"Need not of necessity be real. The pinch will be to make use of it. Make use of it—and the hay will burn!"

"You think it will?"

"What can one man dó against a thousand? His own people dare not support him."

Father Pezelay turned to the lean man who kept the door, and, beckoning to him, conferred a while with him in a low voice.

"A score or so I might get," the man answered presently after some debate. "And well posted, something might be done. But we are not in Paris, good father, where the Quarter of the Butchers is to be counted on, and men know that to kill Huguenots is to do God service! Here"—he shrugged his shoulders contemptuously—"they are sheep."

"It is the King's will," the priest answered, frowning on him darkly.

"Ay, but it is not Tavannes'," the man in black

answered with a grimace. "And he rules here to-day."

"Fool!" Pezelay retorted. "He has not twenty with him. Do you do as I say, and leave the rest to heaven!"

"And to you, good master?" the other answered. "For it is not all you are going to do," he continued with a grin, "that you have told me. Well, so be it! I'll do my part, but I wish we were in Paris. Ste. Genevieve is ever kind to her servants."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE ESCAPE.

In a small back room on the second floor of the inn at Angers, a mean, dingy room which looked into a narrow lane, and commanded no prospect more informing than a blind wall, two men sat, fretting; or, rather, one man sat, his chin resting on his hand, while his companion, less patient or more sanguine, strode ceaselessly to and fro. In the first despair of capture —for they were prisoners—they had made up their minds to the worst, and the slow hours of two days had passed over their heads without kindling more than a faint spark of hope in their breasts. But when they had been taken out and forced to mount and ride—at first with feet tied to the horses' girths —they had let the change, the movement, and the open air fan the flame. They had muttered a word to one another, they had wondered, they had reasoned. And though the silence of their guards—from whose sour vigilance the keenest question drew no response—seemed of ill-omen, and, taken with their knowledge of the man into whose hands they had fallen, should have quenched the spark, these two, having special reasons, the one the buoyancy of youth, the other the faith of an enthusiast, cherished the flame. In the breast of one indeed it had blazed into a confidence so arrogant that he now took all for granted, and was not content.

"It is easy for you to say, 'Patience!'" he cried, as he walked the floor in a fever. "You stand to lose no more than your life, and if you escape go free at all points! But he has robbed me of more than life! Of my love, and my self-respect, curse him! He has worsted me not once, but twice and thrice! And if he lets me go now, dismissing me with my life, I shall —I shall kill him!" he concluded, through his teeth.

"You are hard to please!"

"I shall kill him!"

"That were to fall still lower!" the minister answered, gravely regarding him. "I would, M. de Tignonville, you remembered that you are not yet out of jeopardy. Such a frame of mind as yours is no good preparation for death, let me tell you!"

"He will not kill us!" Tignonville cried. "He knows better than most men how to avenge himself!"

"Then he is above most!" La Tribe retorted. "For my part I wish I were sure of the fact, and I should sit here more at ease."

"If we could escape, now, of ourselves!" Tignonville cried. "Then we should save not only life, but honour! Man, think of it! If we could escape, not by his leave but against it! Are you sure that this is Angers?"

"As sure as a man can be who has only seen the Black Town once or twice!" La Tribe answered, moving to the casement—which was not glazed—and peering through the rough wooden lattice. "But if we could escape we are strangers here. We know not which way to go, nor where to find shelter. And for the matter of that," he continued, turning from the window with a shrug of resignation, "'tis no use to talk of it while yonder foot goes up and down

the passage, and its owner bears the key in his pocket."

"If we could get out of his power as we came into it!" Tignonville cried.

"Ay, if! But it is not every floor has a trap!"

"We could take up a board."

The minister raised his eyebrows.

"We could take up a board!" the younger man repeated; and he stepped the mean chamber from end to end, his eyes on the floor. "Or—yes, *mon Dieu!*" with a change of attitude, "we might break through the roof!" And, throwing back his head, he scanned the cobwebbed surface of laths which rested on the unceiled joists.

"Umph!"

"Well, why not, monsieur? Why not break through the ceiling?" Tignonville repeated, and in a fit of energy he seized his companion's shoulder and shook him. "Stand on the bed, and you can reach it."

"And the floor which rests on it!"

"*Par Dieu*, there is no floor! 'Tis a cockloft above us! See there! And there!" And the young man sprang on the bed, and thrust the rowel of a spur through the laths.

La Tribe's expression changed. He rose slowly to his feet. "Try again!" he said.

Tignonville, his face red, drove the spur again between the laths, and worked it to and fro until he could pass his fingers into the hole he had made. Then he gripped and bent down a length of one of the laths, and, passing his arm as far as the elbow through the hole, moved it this way and that. His eyes, as he looked down at his companion through the

falling rubbish, gleamed with triumph. "Where is your floor now?" he asked.

"You can touch nothing?"

"Nothing. It's open. A little more and I might touch the tiles." And he strove to reach higher.

For answer La Tribe gripped him. "Down! Down, monsieur," he muttered. "They are bringing our dinner."

Tignonville thrust back the lath as well as he could, and slipped to the floor; and hastily the two swept the rubbish from the bed. When Badelon, attended by two men, came in with the meal he found La Tribe at the window blocking much of the light, and Tignonville laid sullenly on the bed. Even a suspicious eye must have failed to detect what had been done; the three who looked in suspected nothing and saw nothing. They went out, the key was turned again on the prisoners, and the footsteps of two of the men were heard descending the stairs.

"We have an hour, now!" Tignonville cried; and leaping, with flaming eyes, on the bed, he fell to hacking and jabbing and tearing at the laths amid a rain of dust and rubbish. Fortunately the stuff, falling on the bed, made little noise; and in five minutes, working half-choked and in a frenzy of impatience, he had made a hole through which he could thrust his arms, a hole which extended almost from one joist to its neighbour. By this time the air was thick with floating lime; the two could scarcely breathe, yet they dared not pause. Mounting on La Tribe's shoulders —who took his stand on the bed—the young man thrust his head and arms through the hole, and, resting his elbows on the joists, dragged himself up, and with a final effort of strength landed nose and knees

on the timbers, which formed his supports. A moment to take breath, and press his torn and bleeding fingers to his lips; then, reaching down, he gave a hand to his companion and dragged him to the same place of vantage.

They found themselves in a long narrow cockloft, not more than six feet high at the highest, and insufferably hot. Between the tiles, which sloped steeply on either hand, a faint light filtered in, disclosing the giant rooftree running the length of the house, and at the farther end of the loft the main tie-beam, from which a network of knees and struts rose to the rooftree.

Tignonville, who seemed possessed by unnatural energy, stayed only to put off his boots. Then "Courage!" he panted, "all goes well!" and, carrying his boots in his hands, he led the way, stepping gingerly from joist to joist until he reached the tie-beam. He climbed on it, and, squeezing himself between the struts, entered a second loft similar to the first. At the farther end of this a rough wall of bricks in a timber-frame lowered his hopes; but as he approached it, joy! Low down in the corner where the roof descended, a small door, square, and not more than two feet high, disclosed itself.

The two crept to it on hands and knees and listened. "It will lead to the leads, I doubt?" La Tribe whispered. They dared not raise their voices.

"As well that way as another!" Tignonville answered recklessly. He was the more eager, for there is a fear which transcends the fear of death. His eyes shone through the mask of dust, the sweat ran down to his chin, his breath came and went noisily.

"Naught matters if we can escape him!" he panted. And he pushed the door recklessly. It flew open, the two drew back their faces with a cry of alarm.

They were looking, not into the sunlight, but into a grey dingy garret open to the roof, and occupying the upper part of a gable-end somewhat higher than the wing in which they had been confined. Filthy truckle-beds and ragged pallets covered the floor, and, eked out by old saddles and threadbare horse-rugs, marked the sleeping quarters either of the servants or of travellers of the meaner sort. But the dinginess was naught to the two who knelt looking into it, afraid to move. Was the place empty? That was the point; the question which had first stayed, and then set their pulses at the gallop.

Painfully their eyes searched each huddle of clothing, scanned each dubious shape. And slowly, as the silence persisted, their heads came forward until the whole floor lay within the field of sight. And still no sound! At last Tignonville stirred, crept through the doorway, and rose up, peering round him. He nodded, and, satisfied that all was safe, the minister followed him.

They found themselves a pace or so from the head of a narrow staircase, leading downwards. Without moving they could see the door which closed it below. Tignonville signed to La Tribe to wait, and himself crept down the stairs. He reached the door, and, stooping, set his eye to the hole through which the string of the latch passed. A moment he looked, and then, turning on tiptoe, he stole up again, his face fallen.

"You may throw the handle after the hatchet!" he muttered. "The man on guard is within four yards

of the door." And in the rage of disappointment he struck the air with his hand.

"Is he looking this way?"

"No. He is looking down the passage towards our room. But it is impossible to pass him."

La Tribe nodded, and moved softly to one of the lattices which lighted the room. It might be possible to escape that way, by the parapet and the tiles. But he found that the casement was set high in the roof, which sloped steeply from its sill to the eaves. He passed to the other window, in which a little wicket in the lattice stood open. He looked through it. In the giddy void white pigeons were wheeling in the dazzling sunshine, and gazing down he saw far below him, in the hot square, a row of booths, and troops of people moving to and fro like pigmies; and—and a strange thing, in the middle of all! Involuntarily, as if the persons below could have seen his face at the tiny dormer, he drew back.

He beckoned to M. Tignonville to come to him; and when the young man complied, he bade him in a whisper look down. "See!" he muttered. "There!"

The younger man saw and drew in his breath. Even under the coating of dust his face turned a shade greyer.

"You had no need to fear that he would let us go!" the minister muttered, with half-conscious irony.

"No."

"Nor I! There are two ropes." And La Tribe breathed a few words of prayer. The object which had fixed his gaze was a gibbet: the only one of the three which could be seen from their eyrie.

Tignonville, on the other hand, turned sharply away, and with haggard eyes stared about the room.

"We might defend the staircase," he muttered. "Two men might hold it for a time."

"We have no food."

"No." And then he gripped La Tribe's arm. "I have it!" he cried. "And it may do! It must do!" he continued, his face working. "See!" And lifting from the floor one of the ragged pallets, from which the straw protruded in a dozen places, he set it flat on his head. It drooped at each corner—it had seen much wear—and while it almost hid his face, it revealed his grimy chin and mortar-stained shoulders. He turned to his companion.

La Tribe's face glowed as he looked. "It may do!" he cried. "It's a chance! But you are right! It may do!"

Tignonville dropped the ragged mattress, and tore off his coat; then he rent his breeches at the knee, so that they hung loose about his calves. "Do you the same!" he cried. "And quick, man, quick! Leave your boots! Once outside we must pass through the streets under these"—he took up his burden again and set it on his head—"until we reach a quiet part, and there we——"

"Can hide! Or swim the river!" the minister said. He had followed his companion's example, and now stood under a similar burden. With breeches rent and whitened, and his upper garments in no better case, he looked a sorry figure.

Tignonville eyed him with satisfaction, and turned to the staircase. "Come," he cried, "there is not a moment to be lost. At any minute they may enter our room and find it empty! You are ready? Then, not too softly, or it may rouse suspicion! And mumble something at the door."

He began himself to scold, and, muttering incoherently, stumbled down the staircase, the pallet on his head rustling against the wall on each side. Arrived at the door he fumbled clumsily with the latch, and, when the door gave way, plumped out with an oath —as if the awkward burden he bore were the only thing on his mind. Badelon—he was on duty—stared at the apparition; but the next moment he sniffed the pallet, which was none of the freshest, and, turning up his nose, he retreated a pace. He had no suspicion; the men did not come from the part of the house where the prisoners lay, and he stood aside to let them pass. In a moment, staggering, and going a little unsteadily, as if they scarcely saw their way, they had passed by him, and were descending the staircase.

So far well! Unfortunately, when they reached the foot of that flight they came on the main passage of the first-floor. It ran right and left, and Tignonville did not know which way he must turn to reach the lower staircase. Yet he dared not hesitate; in the passage, waiting about the doors, were four or five servants, and in the distance he caught sight of three men belonging to Tavannes' company. At any moment, too, an upper servant might meet them, ask what they were doing, and detect the fraud. He turned at random, therefore—to the left as it chanced —and marched along bravely, until the very thing happened which he had feared. A man came from a room plump upon them, saw them, and held up his hands in horror.

"What are you doing?" he cried in a rage and with an oath. "Who set you on this?"

Tignonville's tongue clave to the roof of his

mouth. La Tribe from behind muttered something about the stable.

"And time too!" the man said. "Faugh! But how come you this way? Are you drunk? Here!" He opened the door of a musty closet beside him, "Pitch them in here, do you hear? And take them down when it is dark! Faugh! I wonder you did not carry the things through her ladyship's room at once! If my lord had been in and met you! Now then, do as I tell you! Are you drunk?"

With a sullen air Tignonville threw in his mattress. La Tribe did the same. Fortunately the passage was ill-lighted, and there were many helpers and strange servants in the inn. The butler only thought them ill-looking fellows who knew no better. "Now be off!" he continued irascibly, "This is no place for your sort. Be off!" And, as they moved, "Coming! Coming!" he cried in answer to a distant summons; and he hurried away on the errand which their appearance had interrupted.

Tignonville would have gone to work to recover the pallets, for the man had left the key in the door. But as he went to do so the butler looked back, and the two were obliged to make a pretence of following him. A moment, however, and he was gone; and Tignonville turned anew to regain them. A second time fortune was adverse; a door within a pace of him opened, a woman came out. She recoiled from the strange figure; her eyes met his. Unluckily the light from the room behind her fell on his face, and with a shrill cry she named him.

One second and all had been lost, for the crowd of idlers at the other end of the passage had caught her cry, and were looking that way. With presence of

mind Tignonville clapped his hand on her mouth, and, huddling her by force into the room, followed her, with La Tribe at his heels.

It was a large room, in which seven or eight people, who had been at prayers when the cry startled them, were rising from their knees. The first thing they saw was Javette on the threshold, struggling in the grasp of a wild man, ragged and begrimed; they deemed the city risen and the massacre upon them. Carlat threw himself before his mistress, the Countess in her turn sheltered a young girl, who stood beside her and from whose face the last trace of colour had fled. Madame Carlat and a waiting-woman ran shrieking to the window; another instant and the alarm would have gone abroad.

Tignonville's voice stopped it. "Don't you know me?" he cried. "Madame! you at least! Carlat! Are you all mad?"

The words stayed them where they stood in an astonishment scarce less than their alarm. The Countess tried twice to speak; the third time, "Have you escaped?" she muttered.

Tignonville nodded, his eyes bright with triumph. "So far," he said. "But they may be on our heels at any moment! Where can we hide?"

The Countess, her hand pressed to her side, looked at Javette. "The door, girl!" she whispered. "Lock it!"

"Ay, lock it! And they can go by the back-stairs," Madame Carlat answered, awaking suddenly to the situation. "Through my closet! Once in the yard they may pass out through the stables."

"Which way?" Tignonville asked impatiently. "Don't stand looking at me, but——"

"Through this door!" Madame Carlat answered, hurrying to it.

He was following when the Countess stepped forward and interposed between him and the door. "Stay!" she cried; and there was not one who did not notice a new decision in her voice, a new dignity in her bearing. "Stay, monsieur, we may be going too fast. To go out now and in that guise—may it not be to incur greater peril than you incur here? I feel sure that you are in no danger of your life at present. Therefore, why run the risk——"

"In no danger, madame!" he cried, interrupting her in astonishment. "Have you seen the gibbet in the Square? Do you call that no danger?"

"It is not erected for you."

"No?"

"No, monsieur," she answered firmly, "I swear it is not. And I know of reasons, urgent reasons, why you should not go. M. de Tavannes"—she named her husband nervously, as conscious of the weak spot—"before he rode abroad laid strict orders on all to keep within, since the smallest matter might kindle the city. Therefore, M. de Tignonville, I request, nay I entreat," she continued with greater urgency, as she saw his gesture of denial, "you to stay here until he returns."

"And you, madame, will answer for my life?"

She faltered. For a moment, a moment only, her colour ebbed. What if she deceived herself? What if she surrendered her old lover to death? What if—but the doubt was of a moment only. Her duty was plain. "I will answer for it," she said, with pale lips, "if you remain here. And I beg, I implore you—by the love you once had for me, M. Tignonville,"

she added desperately, seeing that he was about to refuse, "to remain here."

"Once!" he retorted, lashing himself into ignoble rage. "By the love I once had! Say, rather, the love I have, madame—for I am no woman-weather-cock to wed the winner, and hold or not hold, stay or go, as he commands! You, it seems," he continued with a sneer, "have learned the wife's lesson well! You would practise on me now, as you practised on me the other night when you stood between him and me! I yielded then, I spared him. And what did I get by it? Bonds and a prison! And what shall I get now? The same! No, madame," he continued bitterly, addressing himself as much to the Carlats and the others as to his old mistress. "I do not change! I loved! I love! I was going and I go! If death lay beyond that door"—and he pointed to it —"and life at his will were certain here, I would pass the threshold rather than take my life of him!" And, dragging La Tribe with him, with a passionate gesture he rushed by her, opened the door, and disappeared in the next room.

The Countess took one pace forward, as if she would have followed him, as if she would have tried farther persuasion. But as she moved a cry rooted her to the spot. A rush of feet and the babel of many voices filled the passage with a tide of sound, which drew rapidly nearer. The escape was known! Would the fugitives have time to slip out below?

Someone knocked at the door, tried it, pushed and beat on it. But the Countess and all in the room had run to the windows and were looking out.

If the two had not yet made their escape they must be taken. Yet no; as the Countess leaned from the

window, first one dusty figure and then a second darted from a door below, and made for the nearest turning out of the Place Ste.-Croix. Before they gained it, four men, of whom Badelon, his grey locks flying, was first, dashed out in pursuit, and the street rang with cries of "Stop him! Seize him! Seize him!" Someone—one of the pursuers or another—to add to the alarm let off a musket, and in a moment, as if the report had been a signal, the Place was in a hubbub, people flocked into it with mysterious quickness, and from a neighbouring roof—whence, precisely, it was impossible to say—the crackling fire of a dozen arquebuses alarmed the city far and wide.

Unfortunately, the fugitives had been baulked at the first turning. Making for a second, they found it choked, and, swerving, darted across the Place towards St.-Maurice, seeking to lose themselves in the gathering crowd. But the pursuers clung desperately to their skirts, overturning here a man and there a child; and then in a twinkling, Tignonville, as he ran round a booth, tripped over a peg and fell, and La Tribe stumbled over him and fell also. The four riders flung themselves fiercely on their prey, secured them, and began to drag them with oaths and curses towards the door of the inn.

The Countess had seen all from her window; had held her breath while they ran, had drawn it sharply when they fell. Now "They have them!" she muttered, a sob choking her, "They have them!" And she clasped her hands. If he had followed her advice! If he had only followed her advice!

But the issue proved less certain than she deemed it. The crowd, which grew each moment, knew

nothing of pursuers or pursued. On the contrary, a cry went up that the riders were Huguenots, and that the Huguenots were rising and slaying the Catholics; and as no story was too improbable for those days, and this was one constantly set about, first one stone flew, and then another, and another. A man with a staff darted forward and struck Badelon on the shoulder, two or three others pressed in and jostled the riders; and if three of Tavannes' following had not run out on the instant and faced the mob with their pikes, and for a moment forced them to give back, the prisoners would have been rescued at the very door of the inn. As it was they were dragged in, and the gates were flung to and barred in the nick of time. Another moment, almost another second, and the mob had seized them. As it was, a hail of stones poured on the front of the inn, and amid the rising yells of the rabble there presently floated heavy and slow over the city the tolling of the great bell of St. Maurice.

CHAPTER XXX.

SACRILEGE!

M. DE MONTSOREAU, Lieutenant-Governor of Saumur, almost rose from his seat in his astonishment. "What! No letters?" he cried, a hand on either arm of his chair.

The Magistrates stared, one and all. "No letters?" they muttered.

And "No letters?" the Provost chimed in more faintly.

Count Hannibal looked smiling round the Council table. He alone was unmoved. "No," he said. "I bear none."

M. de Montsoreau, who, travel-stained and in his corselet, had the second place of honour at the foot of the table, frowned. "But—but, M. le Comte," he said, "my instructions from Monsieur were to proceed to carry out his Majesty's will in co-operation with you, who, I understood, would bring letters *de par le Roi.*"

"I had letters," Count Hannibal answered, negligently. "But on the way I mislaid them."

"Mislaid them?" Montsoreau cried, unable to believe his ears; while the smaller dignitaries of the city, the magistrates and churchmen, who sat on either side of the table, gaped open-mouthed. It was incredible! It was unbelievable! Mislay the King's letters! Who had ever heard of such a thing?

"Yes, I mislaid them. Lost them, if you like it better."

"But you jest!" the Lieutenant-Governor retorted, moving uneasily in his chair. He was a man more highly named for address than courage; and, like most men skilled in finesse, he was prone to suspect a trap. "You jest, surely, monsieur! Men do not lose his Majesty's letters, by the way."

"When they contain his Majesty's will, no," Tavannes answered, with a peculiar smile.

"You imply, then?"

Count Hannibal shrugged his shoulders but had not answered when Bigot entered and handed him his sweetmeat box; he paused to open it and select a prune. He was long in selecting; but no change of countenance led any of those at the table to suspect that inside the lid of the box was a message—a scrap of paper informing him that Montsoreau had left fifty spears in the suburb without the Saumur gate, besides those whom he had brought openly into the town. Tavannes read the note slowly while he seemed to be choosing his fruit. And then, "Imply?" he answered. "I imply nothing, M. de Montsoreau."

"But——"

"But that sometimes his Majesty finds it prudent to give orders which he does not mean to be carried out. There are things which start up before the eye," Tavannes continued, negligently tapping the box on the table, "and there are things which do not; sometimes the latter are the more important. You, better than I, M. de Montsoreau, know that the King in the Gallery at the Louvre is one, and in his closet is another."

"Yes."

"And that being so——"

"You do not mean to carry the letters into effect?"

"Had I the letters, certainly, my friend. I should be bound by them. But I took good care to lose them," Tavannes added naïvely. "I am no fool."

"Umph!"

"However," Count Hannibal continued, with an airy gesture, "that is my affair. If you, M. de Montsoreau, feel inclined, in spite of the absence of my letters, to carry yours into effect, by all means do so —after midnight of to-day."

M. de Montsoreau breathed hard. "And why," he asked, half sulkily and half ponderously, "after midnight only, M. le Comte?"

"Merely that I may be clear of all suspicion of having lot or part in the matter," Count Hannibal answered pleasantly. "After midnight of to-night by all means, do as you please. Until midnight, by your leave, we will be quiet."

The Lieutenant-Governor moved doubtfully in his chair, the fear—which Tavannes had shrewdly instilled into his mind—that he might be disowned if he carried out his instructions, struggling with his avarice and his self-importance. He was rather crafty than bold; and such things had been, he knew. Little by little, and while he sat gloomily debating, the notion of dealing with one or two and holding the body of the Huguenots to ransom—a notion which, in spite of everything, was to bear good fruit for Angers—began to form in his mind. The plan suited him: it left him free to face either way, and it would fill his pockets more genteelly than would open robbery. On the other hand, he would offend his brother and the fanatical party, with whom he com-

monly acted. They were looking to see him assert himself. They were looking to hear him declare himself. And——

Harshly Count Hannibal's voice broke in on his thoughts; harshly, a something sinister in its tone. "Where is your brother?" he said. And it was evident that he had not noted his absence until then. "My lord's Vicar of all people should be here!" he continued, leaning forward and looking round the table. His brow was stormy.

Lescot squirmed under his eye, Thuriot turned pale and trembled. It was one of the canons of St.-Maurice who at length took on himself to answer. "His Lordship requested, M. le Comte," he ventured, "that you would excuse him. His duties——"

"Is he ill?"

"He——"

"Is he ill, sirrah?" Tavannes roared. And while all bowed before the lightning of his eye, no man at the table knew what had roused the sudden tempest. But Bigot knew, who stood by the door, and whose ear, keen as his master's, had caught the distant report of a musket shot. "If he be not ill," Tavannes continued, rising and looking round the table in search of signs of guilt, "and there be foul play here, and he the player, the Bishop's own hand shall not save him! By heaven it shall not! Nor yours!" he continued, looking fiercely at Montsoreau. "Nor your master's!"

The Lieutenant-Governor sprang to his feet. "M. le Comte," he stammered, "I do not understand this language! Nor this heat, which may be real or not! All I say is, if there be foul play here——"

"If!" Tavannes retorted. "At least, if there be,

there be gibbets too! And I see necks!" he added, leaning forward. "Necks!" And then, with a look of flame, "Let no man leave this table until I return," he cried, "or he will have to deal with me. Nay," he continued, changing his tone abruptly, as the prudence which never entirely left him—and perhaps the remembrance of the other's fifty spearmen —sobered him in the midst of his rage, "I am hasty. I mean not you, M. de Montsoreau! Ride where you will, ride with me if you will—and I will thank you. Only remember, until midnight Angers is mine!"

He was still speaking when he moved from the table, and, leaving all staring after him, strode down the room. An instant he paused on the threshold and looked back; then he passed out, and clattered down the stone stairs. His horse and riders were waiting, but, his foot in the stirrup, he stayed for a word with Bigot. "Is it so?" he growled.

The Norman did not speak, but pointed towards the Place Ste.-Croix, whence an occasional shot made answer for him.

In those days the streets of the Black City were narrow and crooked, overhung by timber houses and hampered by booths; nor could Tavannes from the old Town Hall—now abandoned—see the Place Ste.-Croix. But that he could cure. He struck spurs to his horse, and, followed by his ten horsemen, he clattered noisily down the paved street. A dozen groups hurrying the same way sprang panic-stricken to the walls, or saved themselves in doorways. He was up with them, he was beyond them! Another hundred yards, and he would see the Place.

And then, with a cry of rage, he drew rein a little, discovering what was before him. In the narrow gut

of the way a great black banner, borne on two poles, was lurching towards him. It was moving in the van of a dark procession of priests, who, with their attendants and a crowd of devout, filled the street from wall to wall. They were chanting one of the penitential psalms, but not so loudly as to drown the uproar in the Place beyond them.

They made no way, and Count Hannibal swore furiously, suspecting treachery. But he was no madman, and at the moment the least reflection would have sent him about to seek another road. Unfortunately, as he hesitated a man sprang with a gesture of warning to his horse's head and seized it; and Tavannes, mistaking the motive of the act, lost his self-control. He struck the fellow down, and with a reckless word rode headlong into the procession, shouting to the black robes to make way, make way! A cry, nay, a very shriek of horror, answered him and rent the air. And in a minute the thing was done. Too late, as the Bishop's Vicar, struck by his horse, fell screaming under its hoofs—too late, as the consecrated vessels which he had been bearing rolled in the mud, Tavannes saw that they bore the canopy and the Host!

He knew what he had done, then. Before his horse's iron shoes struck the ground again, his face—even his face—had lost its colour. But he knew also that to hesitate now, to pause now, was to be torn in pieces; for his riders, seeing that which the banner had veiled from him, had not followed him, and he was alone, in the middle of brandished fists and weapons. He hesitated not a moment. Drawing a pistol he spurred onwards, his horse plunging wildly among the shrieking priests; and though a hundred

hands, hands of acolytes, hands of shaven monks, clutched at his bridle or gripped his boot, he got clear of them. Clear, carrying with him the memory of one face seen an instant amid the crowd, one face seen, to be ever remembered—the face of Father Pezelay, white, evil, scarred, distorted by wicked triumph.

Behind him, the thunder of "Sacrilege! Sacrilege!" rose to heaven, and men were gathering. In front the crowd which skirmished about the inn was less dense, and, ignorant of the thing that had happened in the narrow street, made ready way for him, the boldest recoiling before the look on his face. Some who stood nearest to the inn, and had begun to hurl stones at the window and to beat on the doors—which had only the minute before closed on Badelon and his prisoners—supposed that he had his riders behind him; and these fled apace. But he knew better even than they the value of time; he pushed his horse up to the gates, and hammered them with his boot while he kept his pistol-hand towards the Place and the cathedral, watching for the transformation which he knew would come!

And come it did; on a sudden, in a twinkling! A white-faced monk, frenzy in his eyes, appeared in the midst of the crowd. He stood and tore his garments before the people, and, stooping, threw dust on his head. A second and a third followed his example; then from a thousand throats the cry of "Sacrilege! Sacrilege!" rolled up, while clerks flew wildly hither and thither shrieking the tale, and priests denied the Sacraments to Angers until it should purge itself of the evil thing.

By that time Count Hannibal had saved himself

behind the great gates, by the skin of his teeth. The gates had opened to him in time. But none knew better than he that Angers had no gates thick enough, nor walls of a height, to save him for many hours from the storm he had let loose!

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE FLIGHT FROM ANGERS.

But that only the more roused the devil in the man; that, and the knowledge that he had his own headstrong act to thank for the position. He looked on the panic-stricken people who, scared by the turmoil without, had come together in the courtyard, wringing their hands and chattering; and his face was so dark and forbidding that fear of him took the place of all other fear, and the nearest shrank from contact with him. On any other entering as he had entered, they would have hailed questions; they would have asked what was amiss and if the city were rising, and where were Bigot and his men. But Count Hannibal's eye struck curiosity dumb. When he cried from his saddle, "Bring me the landlord!" the trembling man was found, and brought, and thrust forward almost without a word.

"You have a back gate?" Tavannes said, while the crowd leaned forward to catch his words.

"Yes, my lord," the man faltered.

"Into the street which leads to the ramparts?"

"Ye—yes, my lord."

"Then"—to Badelon—"saddle! You have five minutes. Saddle as you never saddled before," he continued in a low tone, "or——" His tongue did not finish the threat, but his hand waved the man

away. "For you," he held Tignonville an instant with his lowering eye, "and the preaching fool with you, get arms and mount! You have never played aught but the woman yet; but play me false now, or look aside but a foot from the path I bid you take, and you thwart me no more, monsieur! And you, madame," he continued, turning to the Countess, who stood bewildered at one of the doors, the Provost's daughter clinging and weeping about her, "you have three minutes to get your women to horse! See you, if you please, that they take no longer!"

She found her voice with difficulty. "And this child?" she said. "She is in my care."

"Bring her," he muttered with a scowl of impatience. And then, raising his voice as he turned on the terrified gang of hostlers and inn servants who stood gaping round him, "Go help!" he thundered. "Go help! And quickly!" he added, his face growing a shade darker as a second bell began to toll from a neighbouring tower, and the confused babel in the Place Ste.-Croix settled into a dull roar of "*Sacrilège! sacrilège!*"—"Hasten!"

Fortunately it had been his first intention to go to the Council attended by the whole of his troop; and eight horses stood saddled in the stalls. Others were hastily pulled out and bridled, and the women were mounted. La Tribe, at a look from Tavannes, took behind him the Provost's daughter, who was helpless with terror. Between the suddenness of the alarm, the uproar without, and the panic within, none but a man whose people served him at a nod and dreaded his very gesture could have got his party mounted in time. Javette would fain have swooned, but she dared not. Tignonville would fain have questioned,

but he shrank from the venture. The Countess would fain have said something, but she forced herself to obey and no more. Even so the confusion in the courtyard, the mingling of horses and men and trappings and saddle-bags, would have made another despair; but wherever Count Hannibal, seated in his saddle in the middle, turned his face, chaos settled into a kind of order, servants, ceasing to listen to the yells and cries outside, ran to fetch, women dropped cloaks from the gallery, and men loaded muskets and strapped on bandoliers.

Until at last—but none knew what those minutes of suspense cost him—he saw all mounted, and, pistol in hand, shepherded them to the back gates. As he did so he stooped for a few scowling words with Badelon, whom he sent to the van of the party: then he gave the word to open. It was done; and even as Montsoreau's horsemen, borne on the bosom of a second and more formidable throng, swept raging into the already crowded square, and the cry went up for "a ram! a ram!" to batter in the gates, Tavannes, hurling his little party before him, dashed out at the back, and putting to flight a handful of rascals who had wandered to that side, cantered unmolested down the lane to the ramparts. Turning eastward at the foot of the frowning Castle, he followed the inner side of the wall in the direction of the gate by which he had entered the preceding evening.

To gain this his party had to pass the end of the Rue Toussaint, which issues from the Place Ste.-Croix and runs so straight that the mob seething in front of the inn had only to turn their heads to see them. The danger incurred at this point was great; for a party as small as Tavannes' and encumbered

with women would have had no chance if attacked within the walls.

Count Hannibal knew it. But he knew also that the act which he had committed rendered the north bank of the Loire impossible for him. Neither King nor Marshal, neither Charles of Valois nor Gaspard of Tavannes, would dare to shield him from an infuriated Church, a Church too wise to forgive certain offences. His one chance lay in reaching the southern bank of the Loire—roughly speaking, the Huguenot bank—and taking refuge in some town, Rochelle or St. Jean d'Angely, where the Huguenots were strong, and whence he might take steps to set himself right with his own side.

But to cross the great river which divides France into two lands widely differing he must leave the city by the east gate; for the only bridge over the Loire within forty miles of Angers lay eastward from the town, at Ponts de Cé, four miles away. To this gate, therefore, past the Rue Toussaint, he whirled his party daringly; and though the women grew pale as the sounds of riot broke louder on the ear, and they discovered that they were approaching instead of leaving the danger—and though Tignonville for an instant thought him mad, and snatched at the Countess's rein—his men-at-arms, who knew him, galloped stolidly on, passed like clockwork the end of the street, and, reckless of the stream of persons hurrying in the direction of the alarm, heedless of the fright and anger their passage excited, pressed steadily on. A moment and the gate through which they had entered the previous evening appeared before them. And—a sight welcome to one of them—it was open.

They were fortunate indeed, for a few seconds later they had been too late. The alarm had preceded them; as they dashed up, a man ran to the chains of the portcullis and tried to lower it. He failed to do so at the first touch, and quailing, fled from Badelon's levelled pistol. A watchman on one of the bastions of the wall shouted to them to halt or he would fire: but the riders yelled in derision, and thundering through the echoing archway, emerged into the open, and saw, extended before them, in place of the gloomy vistas of the Black Town, the glory of the open country and the vine-clad hills, and the fields about the Loire yellow with late harvest.

The women gasped their relief, and one or two who were most out of breath would have pulled up their horses and let them trot, thinking the danger at an end. But a curt savage word from the rear set them flying again, and down and up and on again they galloped, driven forward by the iron hand which never relaxed its grip of them. Silent and pitiless he whirled them before him until they were within a mile of the long Ponts de Cé—a series of bridges rather than one bridge—and the broad shallow Loire lay plain before them, its sandbanks grilling in the sun, and grey lines of willows marking its eyots. By this time some of the women, white with fatigue, could only cling to their saddles with their hands; while others were red-hot, their hair unrolled, and the perspiration mingled with the dust on their faces. But he who drove them had no pity for weakness in an emergency. He looked back and saw, a half-mile behind them, the glitter of steel following hard on their heels: and "Faster! faster!" he cried, regardless of their prayers: and he beat the rearmost of the

horses with his scabbard. A waiting-woman shrieked that she should fall, but he answered ruthlessly, "Fall then, fool!" and the instinct of self-preservation coming to her aid, she clung and bumped and toiled on with the rest until they reached the first houses of the town about the bridges, and Badelon raised his hand as a signal that they might slacken speed.

The bewilderment of the start had been so great that it was then only, when they found their feet on the first link of the bridge, that two of the party, the Countess and Tignonville, awoke to the fact that their faces were set southwards. To cross the Loire in those days meant much to all: to a Huguenot very much. It chanced that these two rode on to the bridge side by side, and the memory of their last crossing—the remembrance that, on their journey north a month before, they had crossed it hand-in-hand with the prospect of passing their lives together, and with no faintest thought of the events which were to ensue, flashed into the mind of each of them. It deepened the flush which exertion had brought to the woman's cheek, then left it paler than before. A minute earlier she had been wroth with her old lover; she had held him accountable for the outbreak in the town and this hasty retreat; now her anger died as she looked and she remembered. In the man, shallower of feeling and more alive to present contingencies, the uppermost emotion as he trod the bridge was one of surprise and congratulation.

He could not at first believe in their good fortune. "*Mon Dieu!*" he cried, "we are crossing!" And then again in a lower tone, "We are crossing! We are crossing!" And he looked at her.

It was impossible that she should not look back;

that she who had ceased to be angry should not feel and remember; impossible that her answering glance should not speak to his heart. Below them, as on that day a month earlier, when they had crossed the bridges going northward, the broad shallow river ran its course in the sunshine, its turbid currents gleaming and flashing about the sandbanks and osier-beds. To the eye, the landscape, save that the vintage was farther advanced and the harvest in part gathered in, was the same. But how changed were their relations, their prospects, their hopes, who had then crossed the river hand-in-hand, planning a life to be passed together.

The young man's rage boiled up at the thought. Too vividly, too sharply it showed him the wrongs which he had suffered at the hands of the man who rode behind him, the man who even now drove him on and ordered him and insulted him. He forgot that he might have perished in the general massacre if Count Hannibal had not intervened. He forgot that Count Hannibal had spared him once and twice. He laid on his enemy's shoulders the guilt of all, the blood of all: and as, quick on the thought of his wrongs and his fellows' wrongs followed the reflection that with every league they rode southwards the chance of requital grew, he cried again, and this time joyously, "We are crossing! A little, and we shall be in our own land!"

The tears filled the Countess's eyes as she looked westwards and southwards. "Vrillac is there!" she cried; and she pointed. "I smell the sea!"

"Ay!" he answered, almost under his breath. "It lies there! And no more than thirty leagues from us! With fresh horses we might see it in two days!"

Badelon's voice broke in on them. "Forward!" he cried as they reached the southern bank. "*En avant!*" And, obedient to the word, the little party, refreshed by the short respite, took the road out of Ponts de Cé at a steady trot. Nor was the Countess the only one whose face glowed, being set southwards, or whose heart pulsed to the rhythm of the horses' hoofs that beat out "Home!" Carlat's and Madame Carlat's also. Javette even, hearing from her neighbour that they were over the Loire, plucked up courage; while La Tribe, gazing before him with moistened eyes, cried "Comfort" to the scared and weeping girl who clung to his belt. It was singular to see how all sniffed the air as if already it smacked of the sea and of the south; and how they of Poitou sat their horses as if they asked nothing better than to ride on and on and on until the scenes of home arose about them. For them the sky had already a deeper blue, the air a softer fragrance, the sunshine a purity long unknown!

Was it wonderful, when they had suffered so much on that northern bank? When their experience during the month had been comparable only with the direst nightmare? Yet one among them, after the first impulse of relief and satisfaction, felt differently. Tignonville's gorge rose against the sense of compulsion, of inferiority. To be driven forward after this fashion, whether he would or no, to be placed at the beck of every base-born man-at-arms, to have no clearer knowledge of what had happened or of what was passing, or of the peril from which they fled, than the women among whom he rode—these things kindled anew the sullen fire of hate. North of the Loire there had been some excuse for his inaction un-

der insult; he had been in the man's country and power. But south of the Loire, within forty leagues of Huguenot Niort, must he still suffer, still be supine?

His rage was inflamed by a disappointment he presently underwent. Looking back as they rode clear of the wooden houses of Ponts de Cé, he missed Tavannes and several of his men; and he wondered if Count Hannibal had remained on his own side of the river. It seemed possible; and in that event La Tribe and he and Carlat might deal with Badelon and the four who still escorted them. But when he looked back a minute later, Tavannes was within sight, following the party with a stern face; and not Tavannes only. Bigot, with two of the ten men who hitherto had been missing, was with him.

It was clear, however, that they brought no good news, for they had scarcely ridden up before Count Hannibal cried "Faster! faster!" in his harshest voice, and Bigot urged the horses to a quicker trot. Their course lay almost parallel with the Loire in the direction of Beaupréau; and Tignonville began to fear that Count Hannibal intended to recross the river at Nantes, where the only bridge below Angers spanned the stream. With this in view it was easy to comprehend his wish to distance his pursuers before he recrossed.

The Countess had no such thought. "They must be close upon us!" she murmured, as she urged her horse in obedience to the order.

"Whoever they are!" Tignonville muttered bitterly. "If we knew what had happened, or who followed, we should know more about it, madame. For

that matter, I know what I wish he would do. And our heads are set for it."

"What?"

"Make for Vrillac!" he answered, a savage gleam in his eyes.

"For Vrillac?"

"Yes."

"Ah, if he would!" she cried, her face turning pale. "If he would. He would be safe there!"

"Ay, quite safe!" he answered with a peculiar intonation. And he looked at her askance.

He fancied that his thought, the thought which had just flashed into his brain, was her thought; that she had the same notion in reserve, and that they were in sympathy. And Tavannes, seeing them talking together, and noting her look and the fervour of her gesture, formed the same opinion, and retired more darkly into himself. The downfall of his plan for dazzling her by a magnanimity unparalleled and beyond compare, a plan dependent on the submission of Angers—his disappointment in this might have roused the worst passions of a better man. But there was in this man a pride on a level at least with his other passions: and to bear himself in this hour of defeat and flight so that if she could not love him she must admire him, checked in a strange degree the current of his rage. When Tignonville presently looked back he found that Count Hannibal and six of his riders had pulled up and were walking their horses far in the rear. On which he would have done the same himself; but Badelon called over his shoulder the eternal "Forward, monsieur, *en avant!*" and sullenly, hating the man and his master more deeply every

hour, Tignonville was forced to push on, with thoughts of vengeance in his heart.

Trot, trot! Trot, trot! Through a country which had lost its smiling wooded character and grew more sombre and less fertile the farther they left the Loire behind them. Trot, trot! Trot, trot!—for ever, it seemed to some. Javette wept with fatigue, and the other women were little better. The Countess herself spoke seldom except to cheer the Provost's daughter; who, poor girl, flung suddenly out of the round of her life and cast among strangers, showed a better spirit than might have been expected. At length, on the slopes of some low hills, which they had long seen before them, a cluster of houses and a church appeared; and Badelon, drawing rein, cried, "Beaupréau, madame! We stay an hour!"

It was six o'clock. They had ridden some hours without a break. With sighs and cries of pain the women dropped from their clumsy saddles, while the men laid out such food—it was little—as had been brought, and hobbled the horses that they might feed. The hour passed rapidly, and when it had passed Badelon was inexorable. There was wailing when he gave the word to mount again; and Tignonville, fiercely resenting this dumb, reasonless flight, was at heart one of the mutineers. But Badelon said grimly that they might go on and live, or stay and die, as it pleased them; and once more they climbed painfully to their saddles, and jogged steadily on through the sunset, through the gloaming, through the darkness, across a weird, mysterious country of low hills and narrow plains which grew more wild and less cultivated as they advanced. Fortunately the horses had been well saved during the long lei-

surely journey to Angers, and now went well and strongly. When they at last unsaddled for the night in a little dismal wood within a mile of Clisson, they had placed some forty miles between themselves and Angers.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE ORDEAL BY STEEL.

THE women for the most part fell like sacks and slept where they alighted, dead weary. The men, when they had cared for the horses, followed the example; for Badelon would suffer no fire. In less than half an hour, a sentry who stood on guard at the edge of the wood, and Tignonville and La Tribe, who talked in low voices with their backs against a tree, were the only persons who remained awake, with the exception of the Countess. Carlat had made a couch for her, and screened it with cloaks from the wind and the eye; for the moon had risen, and where the trees stood sparsest its light flooded the soil with pools of white. But Madame had not yet retired to her bed. The two men, whose voices reached her, saw her from time to time moving restlessly to and fro between the road and the little encampment. Presently she came and stood over them.

"He led His people out of the wilderness," La Tribe was saying; "out of the trouble of Paris, out of the trouble of Angers, and always, always southward. If you do not in this, monsieur, see His finger——"

"And Angers?" Tignonville struck in, with a faint sneer. "Has He led that out of trouble? A day or two ago you would risk all to save it, my friend.

Now, with your back safely turned on it, you think all for the best."

"We did our best," the minister answered humbly. "From the day we met in Paris we have been but instruments."

"To save Angers?"

"To save a remnant."

On a sudden the Countess raised her hand. "Do you not hear horses, monsieur?" she cried. She had been listening to the noises of the night, and had paid little heed to what the two were saying.

"One of ours moved," Tignonville answered listlessly. "Why do you not lie down, madame?"

Instead of answering, "Whither is he going?" she asked. "Do you know?"

"I wish I did know," the young man answered peevishly. "To Niort, it may be. Or presently he will double back and recross the Loire."

"He would have gone by Cholet to Niort," La Tribe said. "The direction is rather that of Rochelle. God grant we be bound thither!"

"Or to Vrillac," the Countess cried, clasping her hands in the darkness. "Can it be to Vrillac he is going?"

The minister shook his head.

"Ah, let it be to Vrillac!" she cried, a thrill in her voice. "We should be safe there. And he would be safe."

"Safe?" echoed a fourth and deeper voice. And out of the darkness beside them loomed a tall figure.

The minister looked and leapt to his feet. Tignonville rose more slowly.

The voice was Tavannes'. "And where am I to be

safe?" he repeated slowly, a faint ring of saturnine amusement in his tone.

"At Vrillac," she cried. "In my house, monsieur."

He was silent a moment. Then, "Your house, madame? In which direction is it, from here?"

"Westwards," she answered impulsively, her voice quivering with eagerness and emotion and hope. "Westwards, monsieur—on the sea. The causeway from the land is long, and ten can hold it against ten hundred."

"Westwards? And how far westwards?"

Tignonville answered for her; in his tone throbbed the same eagerness, the same anxiety, which spoke in hers. Nor was Count Hannibal's ear deaf to it. "Through Challans," he said, "thirteen leagues."

"From Clisson?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Comte."

"And by Commequiers less," the Countess cried.

"No, it is a worse road," Tignonville answered quickly; "and longer in time."

"But we came——"

"At our leisure, madame. The road is by Challans, if we wish to be there quickly."

"Ah!" Count Hannibal said. In the darkness it was impossible to see his face or mark how he took it. "But being there, I have few men."

"I have forty will come at call," she cried with pride. "A word to them, and in four hours or a little more——"

"They would outnumber mine by four to one," Count Hannibal answered coldly, drily, in a voice like ice-water flung in their faces. "Thank you, madame; I understand. To Vrillac is no long ride;

but we will not ride it at present." And he turned sharply on his heel and strode from them.

He had not covered thirty paces before she overtook him in the middle of a broad patch of moonlight and touched his arm. He wheeled swiftly, his hand half-way to his hilt. Then he saw who it was. "Ah," he said, "I had forgotten, madame. You have come——"

"No!" she cried passionately; and standing before him she shook back the hood of her cloak that he might look into her eyes. "You owe me no blow to-day. You have paid me, monsieur. You have struck me already, and foully, like a coward. Do you remember," she continued rapidly, "the hour after our marriage, and what you said to me? Do you remember what you told me? And whom to trust and whom to suspect, where lay our interest and where our foes'? You trusted me then! What have I done that you now dare—ay, dare, monsieur," she repeated fearlessly, her face pale and her eyes glittering with excitement, "to insult me? That you treat me as—Javette? That you deem me capable of *that?* Of luring you into a trap, and in my own house, or the house that was mine, of——"

"Treating me as I have treated others."

"You have said it!" she cried. She could not herself understand why his distrust had wounded her so sharply, so home, that all fear of him was gone. "You have said it, and put that between us which will not be removed. I could have forgiven blows," she continued, breathless in her excitement, "so you had thought me what I am. But now you will do well to watch me! You will do well to leave Vrillac on one side. For were you there, and raised your

hand against me—not that that touches me, but it will do—and there are those, I tell you, would fling you from the tower at my word."

"Indeed?"

"Ay, indeed! And indeed, monsieur!"

Her face was in moonlight, his was in shadow.

"And this is your new tone, madame, is it?" he said, slowly and after a pregnant pause. "The crossing of a river has wrought so great a change in you?"

"No!" she cried.

"Yes," he said. And despite herself she flinched before the grimness of his tone. "You have yet to learn one thing, however: that I do not change. That, north or south, I am the same to those who are the same to me. That what I have won on the one bank I will hold on the other, in the teeth of all, and though God's Church be thundering on my heels! I go to Vrillac——"

"You—go?" she cried. "You go?"

"I go," he repeated, "to-morrow. And among your own people I will see what language you will hold. While you were in my power I spared you. Now that you are in your own land, now that you lift your hand against me, I will show you of what make I am. If blows will not tame you, I will try that will suit you less. Ay, you wince, madame! You had done well had you thought twice before you threatened, and thrice before you took in hand to scare Tavannes with a parcel of clowns and fisherfolk. To-morrow, to Vrillac and your duty! And one word more, madame," he continued, turning back to her truculently when he had gone some paces from her. "If I find you plotting with your lover by the way I

will hang not you, but him. I have spared him a score of times; but I know him, and I do not trust him."

"Nor me," she said, and with a white, set face she looked at him in the moonlight. "Had you not better hang me now?"

"Why?"

"Lest I do you an injury!" she cried with passion; and she raised her hand and pointed northward. "Lest I kill you some night, monsieur! I tell you, a thousand men on your heels are less dangerous than the woman at your side—if she hate you."

"Is it so?" he cried. His hand flew to his hilt; his dagger flashed out. But she did not move, did not flinch, only she set her teeth; and her eyes, fascinated by the steel, grew wider.

His hand sank slowly. He held the weapon to her, hilt foremost; she took it mechanically. "You think yourself brave enough to kill me, do you?" he sneered. "Then take this, and strike, if you dare. Take it—strike, madame! It is sharp, and my arms are open." And he flung them wide, standing within a pace of her. "Here, above the collar-bone, is the surest for a weak hand. What, afraid?" he continued, as, stiffly clutching the weapon which he had put into her hand, she glared at him, trembling and astonished. "Afraid, and a Vrillac! Afraid, and 'tis but one blow! See, my arms are open. One blow home, and you will never lie in them. Think of that. One blow home, and you may lie in his. Think of that! Strike, then, madame," he went on, piling taunt on taunt, "if you dare, and if you hate me. What, still afraid! How shall I give you heart? Shall I strike you? It will not be the first

time by ten. I keep count, you see," he continued mockingly. "Or shall I kiss you? Ay, that may do. And it will not be against your will, either, for you have that in your hand will save you in an instant. Even"—he drew a foot nearer—"now! Even——" And he stooped until his lips almost touched hers.

She sprang back. "Oh, do not!" she cried. "Oh, do not!" And, dropping the dagger, she covered her face with her hands, and burst into weeping.

He stooped coolly, and, after groping some time for the poniard, drew it from the leaves among which it had fallen. He put it into the sheath, and not until he had done that did he speak. Then it was with a sneer. "I have no need to fear overmuch," he said. "You are a poor hater, madame. And poor haters make poor lovers. 'Tis his loss! If you will not strike a blow for him, there is but one thing left. Go, dream of him!"

And shrugging his shoulders contemptuously he turned on his heel.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE AMBUSH.

THE start they made at daybreak was gloomy and ill-omened, through one of those white mists which are blown from the Atlantic over the flat lands of Western Poitou. The horses, looming gigantic through the fog, winced as the cold harness was girded on them. The men hurried to and fro with saddles on their heads, and stumbled over other saddles, and swore savagely. The women turned mutinous and would not rise; or, being dragged up by force, shrieked wild unfitting words, as they were driven to the horses. The Countess looked on and listened, and shuddered, waiting for Carlat to set her on her horse. She had gone during the last three weeks through much that was dreary, much that was hopeless; but the chill discomfort of this forced start, with tired horses and wailing women, would have darkened the prospect of home had there been no fear or threat to cloud it.

He whose will compelled all stood a little apart and watched all, silent and gloomy. When Badelon, after taking his orders and distributing some slices of black bread to be eaten in the saddle, moved off at the head of his troop, Count Hannibal remained behind, attended by Bigot and the eight riders who had formed the rearguard so far. He had not approached

the Countess since rising, and she had been thankful for it. But now, as she moved away, she looked back and saw him still standing; she marked that he wore his corselet, and in one of those revulsions of feeling —which outrun man's reason—she who had tossed on her couch through half the night, in passionate revolt against the fate before her, took fire at his neglect and his silence; she resented on a sudden the distance he kept, and his scorn of her. Her breast heaved, her colour came, involuntarily she checked her horse, as if she would return to him, and speak to him. Then the Carlats and the others closed up behind her, Badelon's monotonous "Forward, madame, *en avant!*" proclaimed the day's journey begun, and she saw him no more.

Nevertheless, the motionless figure, looming Homeric through the fog, with gleams of wet light reflected from the steel about it, dwelt long in her mind. The road which Badelon followed, slowly at first, and with greater speed as the horses warmed to their work, and the women, sore and battered, resigned themselves to suffering, wound across a flat expanse broken by a few hills. These were little more than mounds, and for the most part were veiled from sight by the low-lying sea-mist, through which gnarled and stunted oaks rose mysterious, to fade as strangely. Weird trees they were, with branches unlike those of this world's trees, rising in a grey land without horizon or limit, through which our travellers moved, jaded phantoms in a clinging nightmare. At a walk, at a trot, more often at a weary jog, they pushed on behind Badelon's humped shoulders. Sometimes the fog hung so thick about them that they saw only those who rose and fell in the saddles imme-

diately before them; sometimes the air cleared a little, the curtain rolled up a space, and for a minute or two they discerned stretches of unfertile fields, half-tilled and stony, or long tracts of gorse and broom, with here and there a thicket of dwarf shrubs or a wood of wind-swept pines. Some looked and saw these things; more rode on sulky and unseeing, supporting impatiently the toils of a flight from they knew not what.

To do Tignonville justice, he was not of these. On the contrary, he seemed to be in a better temper on this day; and, where so many took things unheroically, he showed to advantage. Avoiding the Countess and riding with Carlat, he talked and laughed with marked cheerfulness; nor did he ever fail, when the mist rose, to note this or that landmark, and confirm Badelon in the way he was going.

"We shall be at Lége by noon!" he cried more than once, "and if M. le Comte persists in his plan, may reach Vrillac by late sunset. By way of Challans!"

And always Carlat answered, "Ay, by Challans, monsieur, so be it!"

He proved, too, so far right in his prediction that noon saw them drag, a weary train, into the hamlet of Lége, where the road from Nantes to Olonne runs southward over the level of Poitou. An hour later Count Hannibal rode in with six of his eight men, and, after a few minutes' parley with Badelon, who was scanning the horses, he called Carlat to him. The old man came.

"Can we reach Vrillac to-night?" Count Hannibal asked curtly.

"By Challans, my lord," the steward answered, "I

think we can. We call it seven hours' riding from here."

"And that route is the shortest?"

"In time, M. le Comte, the road being better."

Count Hannibal bent his brows. "And the other way?" he said.

"Is by Commequiers, my lord. It is shorter in distance."

"By how much?"

"Two leagues. But there are fordings and a salt marsh; and with Madame and the women——"

"It would be longer?"

The steward hesitated. "I think so," he said slowly, his eyes wandering to the grey misty landscape, against which the poor hovels of the village stood out naked and comfortless. A low thicket of oaks sheltered the place from southwesterly gales. On the other three sides it lay open.

"Very good," Tavannes said curtly. "Be ready to start in ten minutes. You will guide us."

But when the ten minutes had elapsed and the party were ready to start, to the astonishment of all the steward was not to be found. To peremptory calls for him no answer came; and a hurried search through the hamlet proved equally fruitless. The only person who had seen him since his interview with Tavannes turned out to be M. de Tignonville; and he had seen him mount his horse five minutes before, and move off—as he believed—by the Challans road.

"Ahead of us?"

"Yes, M. le Comte," Tignonville answered, shading his eyes and gazing in the direction of the fringe of trees. "I did not see him take the road, but he was

beside the north end of the wood when I saw him last. Thereabouts!" and he pointed to a place where the Challans road wound round the flank of the wood. "When we are beyond that point, I think we shall see him."

Count Hannibal growled a word in his beard, and, turning in his saddle, looked back the way he had come. Half a mile away, two or three dots could be seen approaching across the plain. He turned again. "You know the road?" he said, curtly addressing the young man.

"Perfectly. As well as Carlat."

"Then lead the way, monsieur, with Badelon. And spare neither whip nor spur. There will be need of both, if we would lie warm to-night."

Tignonville nodded assent and, wheeling his horse, rode to the head of the party, a faint smile playing about his mouth. A moment, and the main body moved off behind him, leaving Count Hannibal and six men to cover the rear. The mist, which at noon had risen for an hour or two, was closing down again, and they had no sooner passed clear of the wood than the trees faded out of sight behind them. It was not wonderful that they could not see Carlat. Objects a hundred paces from them were completely hidden.

Trot, trot! Trot, trot! through a grey world so featureless, so unreal that the riders, now dozing in the saddle, and now awaking, seemed to themselves to stand still, as in a nightmare. A trot and then a walk, and then a trot again; and all a dozen times repeated, while the women bumped along in their wretched saddles, and the horses stumbled, and the men swore at them.

Ha! La Garnache at last, and a sharp turn south-

ward to Challans. The Countess raised her head, and began to look about her. There, should be a church, she knew; and there, the old ruined tower built by wizards, or the Carthaginians, so old tradition ran; and there, to the westward, the great salt marshes towards Noirmoutier. The mist hid all, but the knowledge that they were there set her heart beating, brought tears to her eyes, and lightened the long road to Challans.

At Challans they halted half-an-hour, and washed out the horses' mouths with water and a little *guignolet*—the spirit of the country. A dose of the cordial was administered to the women; and a little after seven they began the last stage of the journey, through a landscape which even the mist could not veil from the eyes of love. There rose the windmill of Soullans! There the old dolmen, beneath which the grey wolf that ate the two children of Tornic had its lair. For a mile back they had been treading my lady's land; they had only two more leagues to ride, and one of those was crumbling under each dogged footfall. The salt flavour, which is new life to the shore-born, was in the fleecy reek which floated by them, now thinner, now more opaque; and almost they could hear the dull thunder of the Biscay waves falling on the rocks.

Tignonville looked back at her and smiled. She caught the look; she fancied that she understood it and his thoughts. But her own eyes were moist at the moment with tears, and what his said, and what there was of strangeness in his glance, half-warning, half-exultant, escaped her. For there, not a mile before them, where the low hills about the fishing village began to rise from the dull inland level—hills

green on the land side, bare and scarped towards the sea and the island—she espied the wayside chapel at which the nurse of her early childhood had told her beads. Where it stood, the road from Commequiers and the road she travelled became one: a short mile thence, after winding among the hillocks, it ran down to the beach and the causeway—and to her home.

At the sight she bethought herself of Carlat, and calling to M. de Tignonville she asked him what he thought of the steward's continued absence.

"He must have outpaced us!" he answered with an odd laugh.

"But he must have ridden hard to do that."

He reined back to her. "Say nothing!" he muttered under his breath. "But look ahead, madame, and see if we are expected!"

"Expected? How can we be expected?" she cried. The colour rushed into her face.

He put his finger to his lip, and looked warningly at Badelon's humped shoulders, jogging up and down in front of them. Then, stooping towards her, in a lower tone, "If Carlat has arrived before us, he will have told them," he said.

"Have told them!" she exclaimed.

"He came by the other road, and it is quicker."

She gazed at him in astonishment, her lips parted; and slowly she comprehended, and her eyes grew hard. "Then why," she said, "did you say it was longer? Had we been overtaken, monsieur, we had had you to thank for it, it seems!"

He bit his lip. "But we have not been overtaken," he rejoined. "On the contrary, you have me to thank for something quite different."

"As unwelcome, perhaps!" she retorted. "For what?"

"Softly, madame."

"For what?" she repeated, refusing to lower her voice. "Speak, monsieur, if you please." He had never seen her look at him in that way.

"For the fact," he answered, stung by her look and tone, "that when you arrive you will find yourself mistress in your own house! Is that nothing?"

"You have called in my people?"

"Carlat has done so, or should have," he answered. "Henceforth," he continued, a ring of exultation in his voice, "it will go hard with M. le Comte, if he does not treat you better than he has treated you hitherto. That is all!"

"You mean that it will go hard with him in any case?" she cried, her bosom rising and falling.

"I mean, madame—— But there they are! Good Carlat! Brave Carlat! He has done well."

"Carlat?"

"Ay, there they are! And you are mistress in your own land! At last you are mistress, and you have me to thank for it! See!" And heedless in his exultation whether Badelon understood or not, he pointed to a place before them where the road wound between two low hills. Over the green shoulder of one of these, a dozen bright points caught and reflected the last evening light; while as he spoke a man rose to his feet on the hill-side above, and began to make signs to persons below. A pennon, too, showed an instant over the shoulder, fluttered, and was gone.

Badelon looked as they looked. The next instant he uttered a low oath, and dragged his horse across the front of the party. "Pierre!" he cried to the

man on his left, "Ride for your life! To my lord, and tell him we are ambushed!" And as the trained soldier wheeled about and spurred away, the sacker of Rome turned a dark scowling face on Tignonville. "If this be your work," he hissed, "we shall thank you for it in hell! For it is where most of us will lie to-night! They are Montsoreau's spears, and they have those with them are worse to deal with than themselves!" Then in a different tone, and throwing off all disguise, "Men to the front!" he shouted. "And you, madame, to the rear quickly, and the women with you! Now, men, forward, and draw! Steady! Steady! They are coming!"

There was an instant of confusion, disorder, panic; horses jostling one another, women screaming and clutching at men, men shaking them off and forcing their way to the van. Fortunately the enemy did not fall on at once, as Badelon expected, but after showing themselves in the mouth of the valley, at a distance of three hundred paces, hung for some reason irresolute. This gave Badelon time to array his seven swords in front; but real resistance was out of the question, as he knew. And to none seemed less in question than to Tignonville.

When the truth, and what he had done, broke on the young man, he sat a moment motionless with horror. It was only when Badelon had twice summoned him with opprobrious words that he awoke to the relief of action. Even after that he hung an instant trying to meet the Countess's eyes, despair in his own; but it was not to be. She had turned her head, and was looking back, as if thence only and not from him could help come. It was not to him she turned; and he saw it, and the justice of it. And silent,

grim, more formidable even than old Badelon, the veteran fighter, who knew all the tricks and shifts of the *mêlée*, he spurred to the flank of the line.

"Now, steady!" Badelon cried again, seeing that the enemy were beginning to move. "Steady! Ha! Thank God, my lord! My lord is coming! Stand! Stand!"

The distant sound of galloping hoofs had reached his ear in the nick of time. He stood in his stirrups and looked back. Yes, Count Hannibal was coming, riding a dozen paces in front of his men. The odds were still desperate—for he brought but six—the enemy were still three to one. But the thunder of his hoofs as he came up checked for a moment the enemy's onset; and before Montsoreau's people got started again Count Hannibal had ridden up abreast of the women, and the Countess, looking at him, knew that, desperate as was their strait, she had not looked behind in vain. The glow of battle, the stress of the moment, had displaced the cloud from his face; the joy of the born fighter lightened in his eye. His voice rang clear and loud above the press.

"Badelon! wait you and two with madame!" he cried. "Follow at fifty paces' distance, and, when we have broken them, ride through! The others with me! Now forward, men, and show your teeth! A Tavannes! A Tavannes! A Tavannes! We carry it yet!"

And he dashed forward, leading them on, leaving the women behind; and down the sward to meet him, thundering in double line, came Montsoreau's men-at-arms, and with the men-at-arms, a dozen pale, fierce-eyed men in the Church's black, yelling the Church's curses. Madame's heart grew sick as she

heard, as she waited, as she judged him by the fast-failing light a horse's length before his men—with only Tignonville beside him.

She held her breath—would the shock never come? If Badelon had not seized her rein and forced her forward, she would not have moved. And then, even as she moved, they met! With yells and wild cries and a mare's savage scream, the two bands crashed together in a huddle of fallen or rearing horses, of flickering weapons, of thrusting men, of grapples hand-to-hand. What happened, what was happening to anyone, who it was fell, stabbed through and through by four, or who were those who still fought single combats, twisting round one another's horses, those on her right and on her left, she could not tell. For Badelon dragged her on with whip and spur, and two horsemen—who obscured her view—galloped in front of her, and rode down bodily the only man who undertook to bar her passage. She had a glimpse of that man's face, as his horse, struck in the act of turning, fell sideways on him; and she knew it, in its agony of terror, though she had seen it but once. It was the face of the man whose eyes had sought hers from the steps of the church in Angers; the lean man in black, who had turned soldier of the Church—to his misfortune.

Through? Yes, through, the way was clear before them! The fight with its screams and curses died away behind them. The horses swayed and all but sank under them. But Badelon knew it no time for mercy; iron-shod hoofs rang on the road behind, and at any moment the pursuers might be on their heels. He flogged on until the cots of the hamlet appeared on either side of the way; on, until the road forked

and the Countess with strange readiness cried "The left!" on, until the beach appeared below them at the foot of a sharp pitch, and beyond the beach the slow heaving grey of the ocean.

The tide was high. The causeway ran through it, a mere thread lipped by the darkling waves, and at the sight a grunt of relief broke from Badelon. For at the end of the causeway, black against the western sky, rose the gateway and towers of Vrillac; and he saw that, as the Countess had said, it was a place ten men could hold against ten hundred!

They stumbled down the beach, reached the causeway and trotted along it; more slowly now, and looking back. The other women had followed by hook or by crook, some crying hysterically, yet clinging to their horses and even urging them; and in a medley, the causeway clear behind them and no one following, they reached the drawbridge, and passed under the arch of the gate beyond.

There friendly hands, Carlat's foremost, welcomed them and aided them to alight, and the Countess saw, as in a dream, the familiar scene, all unfamiliar: the gate, where she had played, a child, aglow with lantern-light and arms. Men, whose rugged faces she had known in infancy, stood at the drawbridge chains and at the winches. Others blew matches and handled primers, while old servants crowded round her, and women looked at her, scared and weeping. She saw it all at a glance—the lights, the black shadows, the sudden glow of a match on the groining of the arch above. She saw it, and turning swiftly, looked back the way she had come; along the dusky causeway to the low, dark shore, which night was stealing quickly from their eyes. She clasped her hands.

"Where is Badelon?" she cried. "Where is he?" Where is he?"

One of the men who had ridden before her answered that he had turned back.

"Turned back!" she repeated. And then, shading her eyes, "Who is coming?" she asked, her voice insistent. "There is someone coming. Who is it? Who is it?"

Two were coming out of the gloom, travelling slowly and painfully along the causeway. One was La Tribe, limping; the other a rider, slashed across the forehead, and sobbing curses.

"No more!" she muttered. "Are there no more?"

The minister shook his head. The rider wiped the blood from his eyes, and turned up his face that he might see the better. But he seemed to be dazed, and only babbled strange words in a strange *patois*.

She stamped her foot in passion. "More lights!" she cried. "Lights! How can they find their way? And let six men go down the *digue*, and meet them. Will you let them be butchered between the shore and this?"

But Carlat, who had not been able to collect more than a dozen men, shook his head; and before she could repeat the order, sounds of battle, shrill, faint, like cries of hungry seagulls, pierced the darkness which shrouded the farther end of the causeway. The women shrank inward over the threshold, while Carlat cried to the men at the chains to be ready, and to some who stood at loopholes above, to blow up their matches and let fly at his word. And then they all waited, the Countess foremost, peering eagerly into the growing darkness. They could see nothing.

A distant scuffle, an oath, a cry, silence! The

same, a little nearer, a little louder, followed this time, not by silence, but by the slow tread of a limping horse. Again a rush of feet, the clash of steel, a scream, a laugh, all weird and unreal, issuing from the night; then out of the darkness into the light, stepping slowly with hanging head, moved a horse, bearing on its back a man—or was it a man?—bending low in the saddle, his feet swinging loose. For an instant the horse and the man seemed to be alone, a ghostly pair; then at their heels came into view two figures, skirmishing this way and that; and now coming nearer, and now darting back into the gloom. One, a squat figure, stooping low, wielded a sword with two hands; the other covered him with a half-pike. And then beyond these—abruptly as it seemed—the night gave up to sight a swarm of dark figures pressing on them and after them, driving them before them.

Carlat had an inspiration. "Fire!" he cried; and four arquebuses poured a score of slugs into the knot of pursuers. A man fell, another shrieked and stumbled, the rest gave back. Only the horse came on spectrally, with hanging head and shining eyeballs, until a man ran out and seized its head, and dragged it, more by his strength than its own, over the drawbridge. After it Badelon, with a gaping wound in his knee, and Bigot, bleeding from a dozen hurts, walked over the bridge, and stood on either side of the saddle, smiling foolishly at the man on the horse.

"Leave me!" he muttered. "Leave me!" He made a feeble movement with his hand, as if it held a weapon; then his head sank lower. It was Count Hannibal. His thigh was broken, and there was a lance-head in his arm.

The Countess looked at him, then beyond him, past him into the darkness. "Are there no more?" she whispered tremulously. "No more? Tignonville—my——"

Badelon shook his head. The Countess covered her face and wept

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WHICH WILL YOU, MADAME?

It was in the grey dawning of the next day, at the hour before the sun rose, that word of M. de Tignonville's fate came to them in the castle. The fog which had masked the van and coming of night hung thick on its retreating skirts, and only reluctantly and little by little gave up to sight and daylight a certain thing which night had left at the end of the causeway. The first man to see it was Carlat, from the roof of the gateway; and he rubbed eyes weary with watching, and peered anew at it through the mist, fancying himself back in the Place Ste.-Croix at Angers, supposing for a wild moment the journey a dream, and the return a nightmare. But rub as he might, and stare as he might, the ugly outlines of the thing he had seen persisted—nay, grew sharper as the haze began to lift from the grey, slow-heaving floor of sea. He called another man and bade him look. "What is it?" he said. "D'you see, there? Below the village?"

"'Tis a gibbet," the man answered, with a foolish laugh; they had watched all night. "God keep us from it."

"A gibbet?"

"Ay!"

"But what is it for? What is it doing there?"

"It is there to hang those they have taken, very like," the man answered, stupidly practical. And then other men came up, and stared at it and growled in their beards. Presently there were eight or ten on the roof of the gateway looking towards the land and discussing the thing; and by-and-by a man was descried approaching along the causeway with a white flag in his hand.

At that Carlat bade one fetch the minister. "He understands things," he muttered, "and I misdoubt this. And see," he cried after the messenger, "that no word of it come to Mademoiselle!" Instinctively in the maiden home he reverted to the maiden title.

The messenger went, and came again bringing La Tribe, whose head rose above the staircase at the moment the envoy below came to a halt before the gate. Carlat signed to the minister to come forward; and La Tribe, after sniffing the salt air, and glancing at the long, low, misty shore and the stiff ugly shape which stood at the end of the causeway, looked down and met the envoy's eyes. For a moment no one spoke. Only the men who had remained on the gateway, and had watched the stranger's coming, breathed hard.

At last, "I bear a message," the man announced loudly and clearly, "for the lady of Vrillac. Is she present?"

"Give your message!" La Tribe replied.

"It is for her ears only."

"Do you want to enter?"

"No!" The man answered so hurriedly that more than one smiled. He had the bearing of a lay clerk of some precinct, a verger or sacristan; and after a fashion the dress of one also, for he was in dusty

black and wore no sword, though he was girded with a belt. "No!" he repeated, "but if Madame will come to the gate, and speak to me——"

"Madame has other fish to fry," Carlat blurted out. "Do you think that she has naught to do but listen to messages from a gang of bandits?"

"If she does not listen she will repent it all her life!" the fellow answered hardily. "That is part of my message."

There was a pause while La Tribe considered the matter. In the end, "From whom do you come?" he asked.

"From His Excellency the Lieutenant-Governor of Saumur," the envoy answered glibly, "and from my lord Bishop of Angers, him assisting by his Vicar; and from others gathered lawfully, who will as lawfully depart if their terms are accepted. Also from M. de Tignonville, a gentleman, I am told, of these parts, now in their hands and adjudged to die at sunset this day if the terms I bring be not accepted."

There was a long silence on the gate. The men looked down fixedly; not a feature of one of them moved, for no one was surprised. "Wherefore is he to die?" La Tribe asked at last.

"For good cause shown."

"Wherefore?"

"He is a Huguenot."

The minister nodded. "And the terms?" Carlat muttered.

"Ay, the terms!" La Tribe repeated, nodding afresh. "What are they?"

"They are for madame's ear only," the messenger made answer.

"Then they will not reach it!" Carlat broke forth

in wrath. "So much for that! And for yourself, see you go quickly before we make a target of you!"

"Very well, I go," the envoy answered sullenly. "But——"

"But what?" La Tribe cried, gripping Carlat's shoulder to quiet him. "But what? Say what you have to say, man! Speak out, and have done with it!"

"I will say it to her and to no other."

"Then you will not say it!" Carlat cried again. "For you will not see her. So you may go. And the black fever in your vitals."

"Ay, go!" La Tribe added more quietly.

The man turned away with a shrug of the shoulders, and moved off a dozen paces, watched by all on the gate with the same fixed attention. But presently he paused; he returned. "Very well," he said, looking up with an ill grace. "I will do my office here, if I cannot come to her. But I hold also a letter from M. de Tignonville, and that I can deliver to no other hands than hers!" He held it up as he spoke, a thin scrap of greyish paper, the fly-leaf of a missal perhaps. "See!" he continued, "and take notice! If she does not get this, and learns when it is too late that it was offered——"

"The terms," Carlat growled impatiently. "The terms! Come to them!"

"You will have them?" the man answered, nervously passing his tongue over his lips. "You will not let me see her, or speak to her privately?"

"No."

"Then hear them. His Excellency is informed that one Hannibal de Tavannes, guilty of the detestable crime of sacrilege and of other gross crimes, has

taken refuge here. He requires that the said Hannibal de Tavannes be handed to him for punishment, and, this being done before sunset this evening, he will yield to you free and uninjured the said M. de Tignonville, and will retire from the lands of Vrillac. But if you refuse"—the man passed his eye along the line of attentive faces which fringed the battlement—"he will at sunset hang the said Tignonville on the gallows raised for Tavannes, and will harry the demesne of Vrillac to its farthest border!"

There was a long silence on the gate. Some, their gaze still fixed on him, moved their lips as if they chewed. Others looked aside, met their fellows' eyes in a pregnant glance, and slowly returned to him. But no one spoke. At his back the flush of dawn was flooding the east, and spreading and waxing brighter. The air was growing warm; the shore below, from grey, was turning green. In a minute or two the sun, whose glowing marge already peeped above the low hills of France, would top the horizon.

The man, getting no answer, shifted his feet uneasily. "Well," he cried, "what answer am I to take?"

Still no one moved.

"I've done my part. Will no one give her the letter?" he cried. And he held it up. "Give me my answer, for I am going."

"Take the letter!" The words came from the rear of the group in a voice that startled all. They turned as though some one had struck them, and saw the Countess standing beside the wooden hood which covered the stairs. They guessed that she had heard all or nearly all; but the glory of the sunrise, shining full on her at that moment, lent a false warmth to her face, and life to eyes wofully and tragically set.

It was not easy to say whether she had heard or not. "Take the letter," she repeated.

Carlat looked helplessly over the parapet.

"Go down!"

He cast a glance at La Tribe, but he got none in return, and he was preparing to do her bidding when a cry of dismay broke from those who still had their eyes bent downwards. The messenger, waving the letter in a last appeal, had held it too loosely; a light air, as treacherous as unexpected, had snatched it from his hand, and bore it—even as the Countess, drawn by the cry, sprang to the parapet—fifty paces from him. A moment it floated in the air, eddying, rising, falling; then, light as thistle-down, it touched the water and began to sink.

The messenger uttered frantic lamentations, and stamped the causeway in his rage. The Countess only looked, and looked, until the rippling crest of a baby wave broke over the tiny venture, and with its freight of tidings it sank from sight.

The man, silent now, stared a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. "Well, 'tis fortunate it was his," he cried brutally, "and not His Excellency's, or my back had suffered! And now," he added impatiently, "by your leave, what answer?"

What answer? Ah, God, what answer? The men who leant on the parapet, rude and coarse as they were, felt the tragedy of the question and the dilemma, guessed what they meant to her, and looked everywhere save at her. What answer? Which of the two was to live? Which die—shamefully? Which? Which?

"Tell him—to come back—an hour before sunset," she muttered.

They told him and he went; and one by one the men began to go too, and stole from the roof, leaving her standing alone, her face to the shore, her hands resting on the parapet. The light breeze which blew off the land stirred loose ringlets of her hair, and flattened the thin robe against her sunlit figure. So had she stood a thousand times in old days, in her youth, in her maidenhood. So in her father's time had she stood to see her lover come riding along the sands to woo her! So had she stood to welcome him on the eve of that fatal journey to Paris! Thence had others watched her go with him. The men remembered —remembered all; and one by one they stole shamefacedly away, fearing lest she should speak or turn tragic eyes on them.

True, in their pity for her was no doubt of the end, or thought of the victim who must suffer—of Tavannes. They, of Poitou, who had not been with him, knew nothing of him; they cared as little. He was a northern man, a stranger, a man of the sword, who had seized her—so they heard—by the sword. But they saw that the burden of choice was laid on her; there, in her sight and in theirs, rose the gibbet; and, clowns as they were, they discerned the tragedy of her *rôle*, play it as she might, and though her act gave life to her lover.

When all had retired save three or four, she turned and saw these gathered at the head of the stairs in a ring about Carlat, who was addressing them in a low eager voice. She could not catch a syllable, but a look hard, and almost cruel, flashed into her eyes as she gazed; and raising her voice she called the steward to her. "The bridge is up," she said, her tone hard, "but the gates? Are they locked?"

"Yes, Madame."

"The wicket?"

"No, not the wicket." And Carlat looked another way.

"Then go, lock it, and bring the keys to me!" she replied. "Or stay!" Her voice grew harder, her eyes spiteful as a cat's. "Stay, and be warned that you play me no tricks! Do you hear? Do you understand? Or old as you are, and long as you have served us, I will have you thrown from this tower, with as little pity as Isabeau flung her gallants to the fishes. I am still mistress here, never more mistress than this day. Woe to you if you forget it."

He blenched and cringed before her, muttering incoherently.

"I know," she said, "I read you! And now the keys. Go, bring them to me! And if by chance I find the wicket unlocked when I come down, pray, Carlat, pray! For you will have need of prayers."

He slunk away, the men with him; and she fell to pacing the roof feverishly. Now and then she extended her arms, and low cries broke from her, as from a dumb creature in pain. Wherever she looked, old memories rose up to torment her and redouble her misery. A thing she could have borne in the outer world, a thing which might have seemed tolerable in the reeking air of Paris or in the gloomy streets of Angers, wore here its most appalling aspect. Henceforth, whatever choice she made, this home, where even in those troublous times she had known naught but peace, must bear a damning stain! Henceforth this day and this hour must come between her and happiness, must brand her brow, and fix her with a deed of which men and women would

tell while she lived! Oh, God—pray? Who said, pray?

"I!" And La Tribe with tears in his eyes held out the keys to her. "I, madame," he continued solemnly, his voice broken with emotion. "For in man is no help. The strongest man, he who rode yesterday a master of men, a very man of war in his pride and his valour—see him now, and——"

"Don't!" she cried, sharp pain in her voice. "Don't!" And she stopped him with her hand, her face averted. After an interval, "You come from him?" she muttered faintly.

"Yes."

"Is he—hurt to death, think you?" She spoke low, and kept her face hidden from him.

"Alas, no!" he answered, speaking the thought in his heart. "The men who are with him seem confident of his recovery."

"Do they know?"

"Badelon has had experience."

"No, no. Do they know of this?" she cried. "Of this!" And she pointed with a gesture of loathing to the black gibbet on the farther strand.

He shook his head. "I think not," he muttered. And after a moment, "God help you!" he added fervently. "God help and guide you, madame!"

She turned on him suddenly, fiercely. "Is that all you can do?" she cried. "Is that all the help you can give? You are a man. Go down, lead them out; drive off these cowards who drain our life's blood, who trade on a woman's heart! On them! Do something, anything, rather than lie in safety here—here!"

The minister shook his head sadly. "Alas, ma-

dame!" he said, "to sally were to waste life. They outnumber us three to one. If Count Hannibal could do no more than break through last night, with scarce a man unwounded——"

"He had the women!"

"And we have not him!"

"He would not have left us!" she cried hysterically.

"I believe it."

"Had they taken me, do you think he would have lain behind walls? Or skulked in safety here, while—while——" Her voice failed her.

He shook his head despondently.

"And that is all you can do?" she cried, and turned from him, and to him again, extending her arms, in bitter scorn. "All you will do? Do you forget that twice he spared your life? That in Paris once, and once in Angers, he held his hand? That always, whether he stood or whether he fled, he held himself between us and harm? Ay, always? And who will now raise a hand for him? Who?"

"Madame!"

"Who? Who? Had he died in the field," she continued, her voice shaking with grief, her hands beating the parapet—for she had turned from him—"had he fallen where he rode last night, in the front, with his face to the foe, I had viewed him tearless, I had deemed him happy! I had prayed dry-eyed for him who—who spared me all these days and weeks! Whom I robbed and he forgave me! Whom I tempted, and he forbore me! Ay, and who spared not once or twice him for whom he must now—he must now——" And unable to finish the sentence she beat her hands again and passionately on the stones.

"Heaven knows, madame," the minister cried vehemently, "Heaven knows, I would advise you if I could."

"Why did he wear his corselet?" she wailed, as if she had not heard him. "Was there no spear could reach his breast, that he must come to this? No foe so gentle he would spare him this? Or why did *he* not die with me in Paris when we waited? In another minute death might have come and saved us this."

With the tears running down his face he tried to comfort her. "Man that is a shadow," he said, "passeth away—what matter how? A little while, a very little while, and we shall pass!"

"With his curse upon us!" she cried. And, shuddering, she pressed her hands to her eyes to shut out the sight her fancy pictured.

He left her for a while, hoping that in solitude she might regain control of herself. When he returned he found her seated, and outwardly more composed, her arms resting on the parapet-wall, her eyes bent steadily on the long stretch of hard sand which ran northward from the village. By that route her lover had many a time come to her; there she had ridden with him in the early days; and that way they had started for Paris on such a morning and at such an hour as this, with sunshine about them, and larks singing hope above the sand-dunes, and warm wavelets creaming to the horses' hoofs!

Of all which, La Tribe, a stranger, knew nothing. The rapt gaze, the unchanging attitude only confirmed his opinion of the course she would adopt. He was thankful to find her more composed; and in fear of such a scene as had already passed between them he stole away again. He returned by-and-by,

but with the greatest reluctance, and only because Carlat's urgency would take no refusal.

He came this time to crave the key of the wicket, explaining that—rather to satisfy his own conscience and the men than with any hope of success—he proposed to go half-way along the causeway, and thence by signs invite a conference. "It is just possible," he added, hesitating—he feared nothing so much as to raise hopes in her—"that by the offer of a money ransom, Madame——"

"Go," she said, without turning her head. "Offer what you please. But"—bitterly—"have a care of them! Montsoreau is very like Montereau! Beware of the bridge!"

He went and came again in half-an-hour. Then, indeed, though she had spoken as if hope was dead in her, she was on her feet at the first sound of his tread on the stairs; her parted lips and her white face questioned him. He shook his head.

"There is a priest," he said in broken tones, "with them, whom God will judge. It is his plan, and he is without mercy or pity."

"You bring nothing from—him?"

"They will not suffer him to write again."

"You did not see him?"

"No."

CHAPTER XXXV.

AGAINST THE WALL.

In a room beside the gateway, into which, as the nearest and most convenient place, Count Hannibal had been carried from his saddle, a man sat sideways in the narrow embrasure of a loophole, to which his eyes seemed glued. The room, which formed part of the oldest block of the château, and was ordinarily the quarters of the Carlats, possessed two other windows, deep-set indeed, yet superior to that through which Bigot—for he it was—peered so persistently. But the larger windows looked southwards, across the bay—at this moment the noon-high sun was pouring his radiance through them; while the object which held Bigot's gaze and fixed him to his irksome seat, lay elsewhere. The loophole commanded the causeway leading shorewards; through it the Norman could see who came and went, and even the cross-beam of the ugly object which rose where the causeway touched the land.

On a flat truckle-bed behind the door lay Count Hannibal, his injured leg protected from the coverlid by a kind of cage. His eyes were bright with fever, and his untended beard and straggling hair heightened the wildness of his aspect. But he was in possession of his senses; and as his gaze passed from Bigot at the window to the old Free Companion,

who sat on a stool beside him, engaged in shaping a piece of wood into a splint, an expression almost soft crept into his harsh face.

"Old fool!" he said. And his voice, though changed, had not lost all its strength and harshness. "Did the Constable need a splint when you laid him under the tower at Gaeta?"

The old man lifted his eyes from his task, and glanced through the nearest window. "It is long from noon to night," he said quietly, "and far from cup to lip, my lord!"

"It would be if I had two legs," Tavannes answered, with a grimace, half-snarl, half-smile. "As it is—where is that dagger? It leaves me every minute."

It had slipped from the coverlid to the ground. Badelon took it up, and set it on the bed within reach of his master's hand.

Bigot swore fiercely. "It would be farther still," he growled, "if you would be guided by me, my lord. Give me leave to bar the door, and 'twill be long before these fisher clowns force it. Badelon and I——"

"Being in your full strength," Count Hannibal murmured cynically.

"Could hold it. We have strength enough for that," the Norman boasted, though his livid face and his bandages gave the lie to his words. He could not move without pain; and for Badelon, his knee was as big as two with plaisters of his own placing.

Count Hannibal stared at the ceiling. "You could not strike two blows!" he said. "Don't lie to me! And Badelon cannot walk two yards! Fine fighters!" he continued with bitterness, not all bitter. "Fine bars 'twixt a man and death! No, it is time

to turn the face to the wall. And, since go I must, it shall not be said Count Hannibal dared not go alone! Besides——"

Bigot stopped him with an oath that was in part a cry of pain. "D—n her!" he exclaimed in fury, "'tis she is that *besides!* I know it. 'Tis she has been our ruin from the day we saw her first, ay, to this day! 'Tis she has bewitched you until your blood, my lord, has turned to water. Or you would never, to save the hand that betrayed us, never to save a man——"

"Silence!" Count Hannibal cried, in a terrible voice. And rising on his elbow, he poised the dagger as if he would hurl it. "Silence, or I will spit you like the vermin you are! Silence, and listen! And you, old ban-dog, listen too, for I know you obstinate! It is not to save him. It is because I will die as I have lived, fearing nothing and asking nothing! It were easy to bar the door as you would have me, and die in the corner here like a wolf at bay, biting to the last. That were easy, old wolf-hound! Pleasant and good sport!"

"Ay! That were a death!" the veteran cried, his eyes brightening. "So I would fain die!"

"And I!" Count Hannibal returned, showing his teeth in a grim smile. "I too! Yet I will not! I will not! Because so to die were to die unwillingly, and give them triumph. Be dragged to death? No, old dog, if die we must, we will go to death! We will die grandly, highly, as becomes Tavannes! That when we are gone they may say, 'There died a man!'"

"*She* may say!" Bigot muttered scowling.

Count Hannibal heard and glared at him, but pres-

ently thought better of it, and after a pause, "Ay, she too!" he said. "Why not? As we have played the game—for her—so, though we lose, we will play it to the end; nor because we lose throw down the cards! Besides, man, die in the corner, die biting, and he dies too!"

"And why not?" Bigot asked, rising in a fury. "Why not? Whose work is it we lie here, snared by these clowns of fisherfolk? Who led us wrong and betrayed us? He die? Would the devil had taken him a year ago! Would he were within my reach now! I would kill him with my bare fingers! He die? And why not?"

"Why, because, fool, his death would not save me!" Count Hannibal answered coolly. "If it would, he would die! But it will not; and we must even do again as we have done. I have spared him —he's a white-livered hound!—both once and twice, and we must go to the end with it since no better can be! I have thought it out, and it must be. Only see you, old dog, that I have the dagger hid in the splint where I can reach it. And then, when the exchange has been made, and my lady has her silk glove again —to put in her bosom!"—with a grimace and a sudden reddening of his harsh features—"if master priest come within reach of my arm, I'll send him before me, where I go."

"Ay, ay!" said Badelon. "And if you fail of your stroke I will not fail of mine! I shall be there, and I will see to it he goes! I shall be there!"

"You?"

"Ay, why not?" the old man answered quietly. "I may halt on this leg for aught I know, and come to starve on crutches like old Claude Boiteux who

was at the taking of Milan and now begs in the passage under the Châtelet."

"Bah, man, you will get a new lord!"

Badelon nodded. "Ay, a new lord with new ways!" he answered slowly and thoughtfully. "And I am tired. They are of another sort, lords now, than they were when I was young. It was a word and a blow then. Now I am old, with most it is—'Old hog, your distance! You scent my lady!' Then they rode, and hunted, and tilted year in and year out, and summer or winter heard the lark sing. Now they are curled, and paint themselves, and lie in silk and toy with ladies—who shamed to be seen at Court or board when I was a boy—and love better to hear the mouse squeak than the lark sing."

"Still, if I give you my gold chain," Count Hannibal answered quietly, "'twill keep you from that."

"Give it to Bigot," the old man answered. The splint he was fashioning had fallen on his knees, and his eyes were fixed on the distance of his youth. "For me, my lord, I am tired, and I go with you. I go with you. It is a good death to die biting before the strength be quite gone. Have the dagger too, if you please, and I'll fit it within the splint right neatly. But I shall be there——"

"And you'll strike home?" Tavannes cried eagerly. He raised himself on his elbow, a gleam of joy in his gloomy eyes.

"Have no fear, my lord. See, does it tremble?" He held out his hand. "And when you are sped, I will try the Spanish stroke—upwards with a turn ere you withdraw, that I learned from Ruiz—on the shaven-pate. I see them about me now!" the old man continued, his face flushing, his form dilating.

"It will be odd if I cannot snatch a sword and hew down three to go with Tavannes! And Bigot, he will see my lord the Marshal by-and-by; and as I do to the priest, the Marshal will do to Montsoreau. Ho! ho! He will teach him the *coup de Jarnac*, never fear!" And the old man's moustaches curled up ferociously.

Count Hannibal's eyes sparkled with joy. "Old dog!" he cried—and he held his hand to the veteran, who brushed it reverently with his lips—"we will go together then! Who touches my brother, touches Tavannes!"

"Touches Tavannes!" Badelon cried, the glow of battle lighting his bloodshot eyes. He rose to his feet. "Touches Tavannes! You mind at Jarnac——"

"Ah! At Jarnac!"

"When we charged their horse, was my boot a foot from yours, my lord?"

"Not a foot!"

"And at Dreux," the old man continued with a proud, elated gesture, "when we rode down the German pikemen—they were grass before us, leaves on the wind, thistle-down—was it not I who covered your bridle hand, and swerved not in the *mêlée?*"

"It was! It was!"

"And at St. Quentin, when we fled before the Spaniard—it was his day, you remember, and cost us dear——"

"Ay, I was young then," Tavannes cried in turn, his eyes glistening. "St. Quentin! It was the tenth of August. And you were new with me, and seized my rein——"

"And we rode off together, my lord—of the last,

of the last, as God sees me! And striking as we went, so that they left us for easier game."

"It was so, good sword! I remember it as if it had been yesterday!"

"And at Cerisoles, the Battle of the Plain, in the old Spanish wars, that was most like a joust of all the pitched fields I ever saw—at Cerisoles, where I caught your horse? You mind me? It was in the shock when we broke Guasto's line——"

"At Cerisoles?" Count Hannibal muttered slowly. "Why, man, I——"

"I caught your horse, and mounted you afresh? You remember, my lord? And at Landriano, where Leyva turned the tables on us again."

Count Hannibal stared. "Landriano?" he muttered bluntly. "'Twas in '29, forty years ago and more! My father, indeed——"

"And at Rome—at Rome, my lord? *Mon Dieu!* in the old days at Rome! When the Spanish company scaled the wall—Ruiz was first, I next—was it not my foot you held? And was it not I who dragged you up, while the devils of Swiss pressed us hard? Ah, those were days, my lord! I was young then, and you, my lord, young too, and handsome as the morning——"

"You rave!" Tavannes cried, finding his tongue at last. "Rome? You rave, old man! Why, I was not born in those days. My father even was a boy! It was in '27 you sacked it—five-and-forty years ago!"

The old man passed his hands over his heated face, and, as a man roused suddenly from sleep looks, he looked round the room. The light died out of his eyes—as a light blown out in a room; his form

seemed to shrink, even while the others gazed at him, and he sat down. "No, I remember," he muttered slowly. "It was Prince Philibert of Chalons, my lord of Orange."

"Dead these forty years!"

"Ay, dead these forty years! All dead!" the old man whispered, gazing at his gnarled hand, and opening and shutting it by turns. "And I grow childish! 'Tis time, high time, I followed them! It trembles now; but have no fear, my lord, this hand will not tremble then. All dead! Ay, all dead!"

He sank into a mournful silence; and Tavannes, after gazing at him awhile in rough pity, fell to his own meditations, which were gloomy enough. The day was beginning to wane, and with the downward turn, though the sun still shone brightly through the southern windows, a shadow seemed to fall across his thoughts. They no longer rioted in a turmoil of defiance as in the forenoon. In its turn, sober reflection marshalled the past before his eyes. The hopes of a life, the ambitions of a life, moved in sombre procession, and things done and things left undone, the sovereignty which Nostradamus had promised, the faces of men he had spared and of men he had not spared —and the face of one woman.

She would not now be his. He had played highly, and he would lose highly, playing the game to the end, that to-morrow she might think of him highly. Had she begun to think of him at all? In the chamber of the inn at Angers he had fancied a change in her, an awakening to life and warmth, a shadow of turning to him. It had pleased him to think so, at any rate. It pleased him still to imagine—of this he was more confident—that in the time to come, when

she was Tignonville's, she would think of him secretly and kindly. She would remember him, and in her thoughts and in her memory he would grow to the heroic, even as the man she had chosen would shrink as she learned to know him.

It pleased him, that. It was almost all that was left to please him—that, and to die proudly as he had lived. But as the day wore on, and the room grew hot and close, and the pain in his thigh became more grievous, the frame of his mind altered. A sombre rage was born and grew in him, and a passion fierce and ill-suppressed. To end thus, with nothing done, nothing accomplished of all his hopes and ambitions! To die thus, crushed in a corner by a mean priest and a rabble of spearmen, he who had seen Dreux and Jarnac, had defied the King, and dared to turn the St. Bartholomew to his ends! To die thus, and leave her to that puppet! Strong man as he was, of a strength of will surpassed by few, it taxed him to the utmost to lie and make no sign. Once, indeed, he raised himself on his elbow with something between an oath and a snarl, and he seemed about to speak. So that Bigot came hurriedly to him.

"My lord?"

"Water!" he said. "Water, fool!" And, having drank, he turned his face to the wall, lest he should name her or ask for her. For the desire to see her before he died, to look into her eyes, to touch her hand once, only once, assailed his mind and all but whelmed his will. She had been with him, he knew it, in the night; she had left him only at daybreak. But then, in his state of collapse, he had been hardly conscious of her presence. Now to ask for her or to see her would stamp him coward, say what he might

to her. The proverb, that the King's face gives grace, applied to her; and an overture on his side could mean but one thing, that he sought her grace. And that he would not do though the cold waters of death covered him more and more, and the coming of the end—in that quiet chamber, while the September sun sank to the appointed place—awoke wild longings and a wild rebellion in his breast. His thoughts were very bitter, as he lay, his loneliness of the uttermost. He turned his face to the wall.

In that posture he slept after a time, watched over by Bigot with looks of rage and pity. And on the room fell a long silence. The sun had lacked three hours of setting when he fell asleep. When he reopened his eyes, and, after lying for a few minutes between sleep and waking, became conscious of his position, of the day, of the things which had happened, and his helplessness—an awakening which wrung from him an involuntary groan—the light in the room was still strong, and even bright. He fancied for a moment that he had merely dozed off and awaked again; and he continued to lie with his face to the wall, courting a return of slumber.

But sleep did not come, and little by little, as he lay listening and thinking and growing more restless, he got the fancy that he was alone. The light fell brightly on the wall to which his face was turned; how could that be if Bigot's broad shoulders still blocked the loophole? Presently, to assure himself, he called the man by name.

He got no answer.

"Badelon!" he muttered. "Badelon!"

Had he gone, too, the old and faithful? It seemed so, for again no answer came.

He had been accustomed all his life to instant service; to see the act follow the word ere the word ceased to sound. And nothing which had gone before, nothing which he had suffered since his defeat at Angers, had brought him to feel his impotence and his position—and that the end of his power was indeed come—as sharply as this. The blood rushed to his head; almost the tears to eyes which had not shed them since boyhood, and would not shed them now, weak as he was! He rose on his elbow and looked with a full heart; it was as he had fancied. Badelon's stool was empty; the embrasure—that was empty too. Through its narrow outlet he had a tiny view of the shore and the low rocky hill, of which the summit shone warm in the last rays of the setting sun.

The setting sun! Ay, for the lower part of the hill was growing cold; the shore at its foot was grey. Then he had slept long, and the time was come. He drew a deep breath and listened. But on all within and without lay silence, a silence marked, rather than broken, by the dull fall of a wave on the causeway. The day had been calm, but with the sunset a light breeze was rising.

He set his teeth hard, and continued to listen. An hour before sunset was the time they had named for the exchange. What did it mean? In five minutes the sun would be below the horizon; already the zone of warmth on the hillside was moving and retreating upwards. And Bigot and old Badelon? Why had they left him while he slept? An hour before sunset! Why, the room was growing grey, grey and dark in the corners, and—what was that?

He started, so violently that he jarred his leg, and

the pain wrung a groan from him. At the foot of the bed, overlooked until then, a woman lay prone on the floor, her face resting on her outstretched arms. She lay without motion, her head and her clasped hands towards the loophole, her thick, clubbed hair hiding her neck. A woman! Count Hannibal stared, and, fancying he dreamed, closed his eyes, then looked again. It was no phantasm. It was the Countess; it was his wife!

He drew a deep breath, but he did not speak, though the colour rose slowly to his cheek. And slowly his eyes devoured her from head to foot, from the hands lying white in the light below the window to the shod feet; unchecked he took his fill of that which he had so much desired—the seeing her! A woman prone, with all of her hidden but her hands: a hundred acquainted with her would not have known her. But he knew her, and would have known her from a hundred, nay from a thousand, by her hands alone.

What was she doing here, and in this guise? He pondered; then he looked from her for an instant and saw that while he had gazed at her the sun had set, the light had passed from the top of the hill; the world without and the room within were growing cold. Was that the cause she no longer lay quiet? He saw a shudder run through her, and a second; then it seemed to him—or was he going mad?—that she moaned, and prayed in half-heard words, and, wrestling with herself, beat her forehead on her arms, and then was still again, as still as death. By the time the paroxysm had passed, the last flush of sunset had faded from the sky, and the hills were growing dark.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HIS KINGDOM.

COUNT HANNIBAL could not have said why he did not speak to her at once. Warned by an instinct vague and ill-understood, he remained silent, his eyes riveted on her, until she rose from the floor. A moment later she met his gaze, and he looked to see her start. Instead she stood quiet and thoughtful, regarding him with a kind of sad solemnity, as if she saw not him only, but the dead; while first one tremor and then a second shook her frame.

At length, "It is over!" she whispered. "Patience, monsieur; have no fear, I will be brave. But I must give a little to him."

"To him!" Count Hannibal muttered, his face extraordinarily pale.

She smiled with an odd passionateness. "Who was my lover!" she cried, her voice a-thrill. "Who will ever be my lover, though I have denied him, though I have left him to die! It was just. He who has so tried me knows it was just! He whom I have sacrificed—he knows it too, now! But it is hard to be—just," with a quavering smile. "You who take all may give him a little, may pardon me a little, may have—patience!"

Count Hannibal uttered a strangled cry, between a moan and a roar. A moment he beat the coverlid

with his hands in impotence. Then he sank back on the bed. "Water!" he muttered. "Water!"

She fetched it hurriedly, and, raising his head on her arm, held it to his lips. He drank, and lay back again with closed eyes. He lay so still and so long that she thought that he had fainted; but after a pause he spoke. "You have done that?" he whispered, "you have done that?"

"Yes," she answered, shuddering. "God forgive me! I have done that! I had to do that, or——"

"And is it too late—to undo it?"

"It is too late." A sob choked her voice.

Tears—tears incredible, unnatural—welled from under Count Hannibal's closed eyelids, and rolled sluggishly down his harsh cheek to the edge of his beard. "I would have gone," he muttered. "If you had spoken, I would have spared you this."

"I know," she answered unsteadily; "the men told me."

"And yet——"

"It was just. And you are my husband," she replied. "More, I am the captive of your sword, and as you spared me in your strength, my lord, I spared you in your weakness."

"Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu, madame!" he cried, "at what a cost!"

And that arrested, that touched her in the depths of her grief and her horror; even while the gibbet on the causeway, which had burned itself into her eyeballs, hung before her. For she knew that it was the cost to *her* he was counting. She knew that for himself he had ever held life cheap, that he could have seen Tignonville suffer without a qualm. And the thoughtfulness for her, the value he placed on a thing

—even on a rival's life—because it was dear to her, touched her home, moved her as few things could have moved her at that moment. She saw it of a piece with all that had gone before, with all that had passed between them, since that fatal Sunday in Paris. But she made no sign. More than she had said she would not say; words of love, even of reconciliation, had no place on her lips while he whom she had sacrificed awaited his burial.

And meantime the man beside her lay and found it incredible. "It was just," she had said. And he knew it; Tignonville's folly—that and that only had led them into the snare and caused his own capture. But what had justice to do with the things of this world? In his experience, the strong hand—that was justice, in France; and possession—that was law. By the strong hand he had taken her, and by the strong hand she might have freed herself.

And she had not. There was the incredible thing. She had chosen instead to do justice! It passed belief. Opening his eyes on a silence which had lasted some minutes, a silence rendered more solemn by the lapping water without, Tavannes saw her kneeling in the dusk of the chamber, her head bowed over his couch, her face hidden in her hands. He knew that she prayed, and feebly he deemed the whole a dream. No scene akin to it had had place in his life; and, weakened and in pain, he prayed that the vision might last for ever, that he might never awake.

But by-and-by, wrestling with the dread thought of what she had done, and the horror which would return upon her by fits and spasms, she flung out a hand, and it fell on him. He started, and the movement, jarring the broken limb, wrung from him a cry

of pain. She looked up and was going to speak, when a scuffling of feet under the gateway arch, and a confused sound of several voices raised at once, arrested the words on her lips. She rose to her feet and listened. Dimly he could see her face through the dusk. Her eyes were on the door, and she breathed quickly.

A moment or two passed in this way, and then from the hurly-burly in the gateway the footsteps of two men — one limped — detached themselves and came nearer and nearer. They stopped without. A gleam of light shone under the door, and someone knocked.

She went to the door, and, withdrawing the bar, stepped quickly back to the bedside, where for an instant the light borne by those who entered blinded her. Then, above the lantern, the faces of La Tribe and Bigot broke upon her, and their shining eyes told her that they bore good news. It was well, for the men seemed tongue-tied. The minister's fluency was gone; he was very pale, and it was Bigot who in the end spoke for both. He stepped forward, and, kneeling, kissed her cold hand.

"My lady," he said, "you have gained all, and lost nothing. Blessed be God!"

"Blessed be God!" the minister wept. And from the passage without came the sound of laughter and weeping and many voices, with a flutter of lights and flying skirts, and women's feet.

She stared at him wildly, doubtfully, her hand at her throat. "What?" she said, "he is not dead—M. de Tignonville?"

"No, he is alive," La Tribe answered, "he is alive." And he lifted up his hands as if he gave thanks.

"Alive?" she cried. "Alive! Oh, heaven is merciful! You are sure? You are sure?"

"Sure, Madame, sure. He was not in their hands. He was dismounted in the first shock, it seems, and, coming to himself after a time, crept away and reached St. Gilles, and came hither in a boat. But the enemy learned that he had not entered with us, and of this the priest wove his snare. Blessed be God, who put it into your heart to escape it!"

The Countess stood motionless and, with closed eyes, pressed her hands to her temples. Once she swayed as if she would fall her length, and Bigot sprang forward to support and save her. But she opened her eyes at that, sighed very deeply, and seemed to recover herself.

"You are sure?" she said faintly. "It is no trick?"

"No, madame, it is no trick," La Tribe answered. "M. de Tignonville is alive, and here."

"Here!" She started at the word. The colour fluttered in her cheek. "But the keys," she murmured. And she passed her hand across her brow. "I thought—that I had them."

"He has not entered," the minister answered, "for that reason. He is waiting at the postern, where he landed. He came, hoping to be of use to you."

She paused a moment, and when she spoke again her aspect had undergone a subtle change. Her head was high, a flush had risen to her cheeks, her eyes were bright. "Then," she said, addressing La Tribe, "do you, monsieur, go to him, and pray him in my name to retire to St. Gilles, if he can do so without peril. He has no place here—now; and if he can go safely to his home it will be well that he do so.

Add, if you please, that Madame de Tavannes thanks him for his offer of aid, but in her husband's house she needs no other protection."

Bigot's eyes sparkled with joy.

The minister hesitated. "No more, madame?" he faltered. He was tender-hearted, and Tignonville was of his people.

"No more," she said gravely, bowing her head. "It is not M. de Tignonville I have to thank, but Heaven's mercy, that I do not stand here at this moment unhappy as I entered—a woman accursed, to be pointed at while I live. And the dead"—she pointed solemnly through the dark casement to the shore—"the dead lie there."

La Tribe went.

She stood a moment in thought, and then took the keys from the rough stone window-ledge on which she had laid them when she entered. As the cold iron touched her fingers she shuddered. The contact awoke again the horror and misery in which she had groped, a lost thing, when she last felt that chill.

"Take them," she said; and she gave them to Bigot. "Until my lord can leave his couch they will remain in your charge, and you will answer for all to him. Go, now, take the light; and in half-an-hour send Madame Carlat to me."

A wave broke heavily on the causeway and ran down seething to the sea; and another and another, filling the room with rhythmical thunders. But the voice of the sea was no longer the same in the darkness, where the Countess knelt in silence beside the bed—knelt, her head bowed on her clasped hands, as she had knelt before, but with a mind how different, with what different thoughts! Count Hannibal could

see her head but dimly, for the light shed upwards by the spume of the sea fell only on the rafters. But he knew she was there, and he would fain, for his heart was full, have laid his hand on her hair.

And yet he would not. He would not, out of pride. Instead he bit on his harsh beard, and lay looking upward to the rafters, waiting what would come. He who had held her at his will now lay at hers, and waited. He who had spared her life at a price now took his own a gift at her hands, and bore it.

"*Afterwards, Madame de Tavannes*——"

His mind went back by some chance to those words —the words he had neither meant nor fulfilled. It passed from them to the marriage and the blow; to the scene in the meadow beside the river; to the last ride between La Flèche and Angers—the ride during which he had played with her fears and hugged himself on the figure he would make on the morrow. The figure? Alas! of all his plans for dazzling her had come—*this!* Angers had defeated him, a priest had worsted him. In place of releasing Tignonville after the fashion of Bayard and the Paladins, and in the teeth of snarling thousands, he had come near to releasing him after another fashion and at his own expense. Instead of dazzling her by his mastery and winning her by his magnanimity, he lay here, owing her his life, and so weak, so broken, that the tears of childhood welled up in his eyes.

Out of the darkness a hand, cool and firm, slid into his, clasped it tightly, drew it to warm lips, carried it to a woman's bosom. "My lord," she murmured, "I was the captive of your sword, and you spared me. Him I loved you took and spared him too—not

once or twice. Angers, also, and my people you would have saved for my sake. And you thought I could do this! Oh! shame, shame!" But her hand held his always.

"You loved him," he muttered.

"Yes, I loved him," she answered slowly and thoughtfully. "I loved him." And she fell silent a minute. Then, "And I feared you," she added, her voice low. "Oh, how I feared you—and hated you!"

"And now?"

"I do not fear him," she answered, smiling in the darkness. "Nor hate him. And for you, my lord, I am your wife and must do your bidding, whether I will or no. I have no choice."

He was silent.

"Is that not so?" she asked.

He tried weakly to withdraw his hand.

But she clung to it. "I must bear your blows or your kisses. I must be as you will and do as you will, and go happy or sad, lonely or with you, as you will! As you will, my lord! For I am your chattel, your property, your own. Have you not told me so?"

"But your heart," he cried fiercely, "is his! Your heart, which you told me in the meadow could never be mine!"

"I lied," she murmured, laughing tearfully, and her hands hovered over him. "It has come back! And it is on my lips."

And she leant over and kissed him. And Count Hannibal knew that he had entered into his kingdom, the sovereignty of a woman's heart.

. . . . . .

An hour later there was a stir in the village on the mainland. Lanterns began to flit to and fro. Sulkily men were saddling and preparing for the road. It was far to Challans, farther to Lège—more than one day, and many a weary league to Ponts de Cé and the Loire. The men who had ridden gaily southwards on the scent of spoil and revenge turned their backs on the castle with many a sullen oath and word. They burned a hovel or two, and stripped such as they spared, after the fashion of the day; and it had gone ill with the peasant woman who fell into their hands. Fortunately, under cover of the previous night every soul had escaped from the village, some to sea, and the rest to take shelter among the sand dunes; and as the troopers rode up the path from the beach, and through the green valley, where their horses shied from the bodies of the men they had slain, there was not an eye to see them go.

Or to mark the man who rode last, the man of the white face—scarred on the temple—and the burning eyes, who paused on the brow of the hill, and, before he passed beyond, cursed with quivering lips the foe who had escaped him. The words were lost, as soon as spoken, in the murmur of the sea on the causeway; the sea, fit emblem of the Eternal, which rolled its tide regardless of blessing or cursing, good or ill will, nor spared one jot of ebb or flow because a puny creature had spoken to the night.

THE END.

A GENTLEMAN OF FRANCE

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A GENTLEMAN OF FRANCE.

CHAPTER I.

THE SPORT OF FOOLS.

The death of the Prince of Condé, which occurred in the spring of 1588, by depriving me of my only patron, reduced me to such straits that the winter of that year, which saw the King of Navarre come to spend his Christmas at St. Jean d'Angely, saw also the nadir of my fortunes. I did not know at this time—I may confess it to-day without shame—whither to turn for a gold crown or a new scabbard, and neither had nor discerned any hope of employment. The peace lately patched up at Blois between the King of France and the League persuaded many of the Huguenots that their final ruin was at hand; but it could not fill their exhausted treasury or enable them to put fresh troops into the field.

The death of the Prince had left the King of Navarre without a rival in the affections of the Huguenots; the Vicomte de Turenne, whose turbulent ambition already began to make itself felt, and M. de Chatillon, ranking next to him. It was my ill-fortune, however, to be equally unknown to all three leaders, and as the month of December which saw me thus miserably straitened saw me reach the age of forty, which I regard, differing in that from many, as the grand climacteric of a man's life, it will be believed that

I had need of all the courage which religion and a campaigner's life could supply.

I had been compelled some time before to sell all my horses except the black Sardinian with the white spot on its forehead; and I now found myself obliged to part also with my valet de chambre and groom, whom I dismissed on the same day, paying them their wages with the last links of gold chain left to me. It was not without grief and dismay that I saw myself thus stripped of the appurtenances of a man of birth, and driven to groom my own horse under cover of night. But this was not the worst. My dress, which suffered inevitably from this menial employment, began in no long time to bear witness to the change in my circumstances; so that on the day of the King of Navarre's entrance into St. Jean I dared not face the crowd, always quick to remark the poverty of those above them, but was fain to keep within doors and wear out my patience in the garret of the cutler's house in the Rue de la Coutellerie, which was all the lodging I could now afford.

Pardieu, 'tis a strange world! Strange that time seems to me; more strange compared with this. My reflections on that day, I remember, were of the most melancholy. Look at it how I would, I could not but see that my life's spring was over. The crows'-feet were gathering about my eyes, and my moustachios, which seemed with each day of ill-fortune to stand out more fiercely in proportion as my face grew leaner, were already grey. I was out at elbows, with empty pockets, and a sword which peered through the sheath. The meanest ruffler who, with broken feather and tarnished lace, swaggered at the heels of Turenne, was scarcely to be distinguished from me. I had still, it is true, a rock and a few barren acres in Brittany, the last remains of the family property; but the small sums which the peasants could afford to pay were sent annually to Paris, to my mother, who had no other dower. And this I would not touch, being minded to die a gentleman, even if I could not live in that estate.

Small as were my expectations of success, since I had no one at the king's side to push my business, nor any friend at Court, I nevertheless did all I could, in the only way that occurred to me. I drew up a petition, and lying in wait one day for M. Forget, the King of Navarre's secretary, placed it in his hand, begging him to lay it before that prince. He took it, and promised to do so, smoothly, and with as much lip-civility as I had a right to expect. But the careless manner in which he doubled up and thrust away the paper on which I had spent so much labour, no less than the covert sneer of his valet, who ran after me to get the customary present—and ran, as I still blush to remember, in vain—warned me to refrain from hope.

In this, however, having little save hope left, I failed so signally as to spend the next day and the day after in a fever of alternate confidence and despair, the cold fit following the hot with perfect regularity. At length, on the morning of the third day—I remember it lacked but three of Christmas—I heard a step on the stairs. My landlord living in his shop, and the two intervening floors being empty, I had no doubt the message was for me, and went outside the door to receive it, my first glance at the messenger confirming me in my highest hopes, as well as in all I had ever heard of the generosity of the King of Navarre. For by chance I knew the youth to be one of the royal pages; a saucy fellow who had a day or two before cried 'Old Clothes' after me in the street. I was very far from resenting this now, however, nor did he appear to recall it; so that I drew the happiest augury as to the contents of the note he bore from the politeness with which he presented it to me.

I would not, however, run the risk of a mistake, and before holding out my hand, I asked him directly and with formality if it was for me.

He answered, with the utmost respect, that it was for the Sieur de Marsac, and for me if I were he.

'There is an answer, perhaps?' I said, seeing that he lingered.

'The King of Navarre, sir,' he replied, with a low bow, 'will receive your answer in person, I believe.' And with that, replacing the hat which he had doffed out of respect to me, he turned and went down the stairs.

Returning to my room, and locking the door, I hastily opened the missive, which was sealed with a large seal, and wore every appearance of importance. I found its contents to exceed all my expectations. The King of Navarre desired me to wait on him at noon on the following day, and the letter concluded with such expressions of kindness and goodwill as left me in no doubt of the Prince's intentions. I read it, I confess, with emotions of joy and gratitude which would better have become a younger man, and then cheerfully sat down to spend the rest of the day in making such improvements in my dress as seemed possible. With a thankful heart I concluded that I had now escaped from poverty, at any rate from such poverty as is disgraceful to a gentleman; and consoled myself for the meanness of the appearance I must make at Court with the reflection that a day or two would mend both habit and fortune.

Accordingly, it was with a stout heart that I left my lodgings a few minutes before noon next morning, and walked towards the castle. It was some time since I had made so public an appearance in the streets, which the visit of the King of Navarre's Court had filled with an unusual crowd, and I could not help fancying as I passed that some of the loiterers eyed me with a covert smile; and, indeed, I was shabby enough. But finding that a frown more than sufficed to restore the gravity of these gentry, I set down the appearance to my own self-consciousness, and, stroking my moustachios, strode along boldly until I saw before me, and coming to meet me, the same page who had delivered the note.

He stopped in front of me with an air of consequence, and making me a low bow—whereat I saw the bystanders stare, for he was as gay a young spark as maid-of-honour could desire—he begged me to hasten, as the king awaited me in his closet.

'He has asked for you twice, sir,' he continued importantly, the feather of his cap almost sweeping the ground.

'I think,' I answered, quickening my steps, 'that the king's letter says noon, young sir. If I am late on such an occasion, he has indeed cause to complain of me.'

'Tut, tut!' he rejoined, waving his hand with a dandified air. 'It is no matter. One man may steal a horse when another may not look over the wall, you know.'

A man may be gray-haired, he may be sad-complexioned, and yet he may retain some of the freshness of youth. On receiving this indication of a favour exceeding all expectation, I remember I felt the blood rise to my face, and experienced the most lively gratitude. I wondered who had spoken in my behalf, who had befriended me; and concluding at last that my part in the affair at Brouage had come to the king's ears, though I could not conceive through whom, I passed through the castle gates with an air of confidence and elation which was not unnatural, I think, under the circumstances. Thence, following my guide, I mounted the ramp and entered the courtyard.

A number of grooms and valets were lounging here, some leading horses to and fro, others exchanging jokes with the wenches who leaned from the windows, while their fellows again stamped up and down to keep their feet warm, or played ball against the wall in imitation of their masters. Such knaves are ever more insolent than their betters; but I remarked that they made way for me with respect, and with rising spirits, yet a little irony, I reminded myself as I mounted the stairs of the words, 'whom the king delighteth to honour!'

Reaching the head of the flight, where was a soldier on guard, the page opened the door of the antechamber, and standing aside bade me enter. I did so, and heard the door close behind me.

For a moment I stood still, bashful and confused. It seemed to me that there were a hundred people in the room, and that half the eyes which met mine were women's.

Though I was not altogether a stranger to such state as the Prince of Condé had maintained, this crowded anteroom filled me with surprise, and even with a degree of awe, of which I was the next moment ashamed. True, the flutter of silk and gleam of jewels surpassed anything I had then seen, for my fortunes had never led me to the king's Court; but an instant's reflection reminded me that my fathers had held their own in such scenes, and with a bow regulated rather by this thought than by the shabbiness of my dress, I advanced amid a sudden silence.

'M. de Marsac!' the page announced, in a tone which sounded a little odd in my ears; so much so, that I turned quickly to look at him. He was gone, however, and when I turned again the eyes which met mine were full of smiles. A young girl who stood near me tittered. Put out of countenance by this, I looked round in embarrassment to find someone to whom I might apply.

The room was long and narrow, panelled in chestnut, with a row of windows on the one hand, and two fireplaces, now heaped with glowing logs, on the other. Between the fireplaces stood a rack of arms. Round the nearer hearth lounged a group of pages, the exact counterparts of the young blade who had brought me hither; and talking with these were as many young gentlewomen. Two great hounds lay basking in the heat, and coiled between them, with her head on the back of the larger, was a figure so strange that at another time I should have doubted my eyes. It wore the fool's motley and cap and bells, but a second glance showed me the features were a woman's. A torrent of black hair flowed loose about her neck, her eyes shone with wild merriment, and her face, keen, thin, and hectic, glared at me from the dog's back. Beyond her, round the farther fireplace, clustered more than a score of gallants and ladies, of whom one presently advanced to me.

'Sir,' he said politely—and I wished I could match his bow—'you wished to see——?'

'The King of Navarre,' I answered, doing my best.

He turned to the group behind him, and said, in a peculiarly even, placid tone, 'He wishes to see the King of Navarre.' Then in solemn silence he bowed to me again and went back to his fellows.

Upon the instant, and before I could make up my mind how to take this, a second tripped forward, and saluting me, said, 'M. de Marsac, I think?'

'At your service, sir,' I rejoined. In my eagerness to escape the gaze of all those eyes, and the tittering which was audible behind me, I took a step forward to be in readiness to follow him. But he gave no sign. 'M. de Marsac to see the King of Navarre' was all he said, speaking as the other had done to those behind. And with that he too wheeled round and went back to the fire.

I stared, a first faint suspicion of the truth aroused in my mind. Before I could act upon it, however—in such a situation it was no easy task to decide how to act—a third advanced with the same measured steps. 'By appointment I think, sir?' he said, bowing lower than the others.

'Yes,' I replied sharply, beginning to grow warm, 'by appointment at noon.'

'M. de Marsac,' he announced in a sing-song tone to those behind him, 'to see the King of Navarre by appointment at noon.' And with a second bow—while I grew scarlet with mortification—he too wheeled gravely round and returned to the fireplace.

I saw another preparing to advance, but he came too late. Whether my face of anger and bewilderment was too much for them, or some among them lacked patience to see the end, a sudden uncontrollable shout of laughter, in which all the room joined, cut short the farce. God knows it hurt me: I winced, I looked this way and that, hoping here or there to find sympathy and help. But it seemed to me that the place rang with gibes, that every panel framed, however I turned myself, a cruel, sneering face. One behind me cried 'Old Clothes,' and when I turned the other hearth whispered the taunt. It added a thousandfold to my em-

barrassment that there was in all a certain orderliness, so that while no one moved, and none, while I looked at them, raised their voices, I seemed the more singled out, and placed as a butt in the midst.

One face amid the pyramid of countenances which hid the farther fireplace so burned itself into my recollection in that miserable moment, that I never thereafter forgot it; a small, delicate woman's face, belonging to a young girl who stood boldly in front of her companions. It was a face full of pride, and, as I saw it then, of scorn—scorn that scarcely deigned to laugh; while the girl's graceful figure, slight and maidenly, yet perfectly proportioned, seemed instinct with the same feeling of contemptuous amusement.

The play, which seemed long enough to me, might have lasted longer, seeing that no one there had pity on me, had I not, in my desperation, espied a door at the farther end of the room, and concluded, seeing no other, that it was the door of the king's bedchamber. The mortification I was suffering was so great that I did not hesitate, but advanced with boldness towards it. On the instant there was a lull in the laughter round me, and half a dozen voices called on me to stop.

'I have come to see the king,' I answered, turning on them fiercely, for I was by this time in no mood for brow-beating, 'and I will see him!'

'He is out hunting,' cried all with one accord; and they signed imperiously to me to go back the way I had come.

But having the king's appointment safe in my pouch, I thought I had good reason to disbelieve them; and taking advantage of their surprise—for they had not expected so bold a step on my part—I was at the door before they could prevent me. I heard Mathurine, the fool, who had sprung to her feet, cry 'Pardieu! he will take the Kingdom of Heaven by force!' And those were the last words I heard; for, as I lifted the latch—there was no one on guard there—a sudden swift silence fell upon the room behind me.

I pushed the door gently open and went in. There were two men sitting in one of the windows, who turned and looked angrily towards me. For the rest the room was empty. The king's walking-shoes lay by his chair, and beside them the boot-hooks and jack. A dog before the fire got up slowly and growled, and one of the men, rising from the trunk on which he had been sitting, came towards me and asked me, with every sign of irritation, what I wanted there, and who had given me leave to enter.

I was beginning to explain, with some diffidence—the stillness of the room sobering me—that I wished to see the king, when he who had advanced took me up sharply with, 'The king? the king? He is not here, man. He is hunting at St. Valery. Did they not tell you so outside?'

I thought I recognised the speaker, than whom I have seldom seen a man more grave and thoughtful for his years, which were something less than mine, more striking in presence, or more soberly dressed. And being desirous to evade his question, I asked him if I had not the honour to address M. du Plessis Mornay; for that wise and courtly statesman, now a pillar of Henry's counsels, it was.

'The same, sir,' he replied abruptly, and without taking his eyes from me. 'I am Mornay. What of that?'

'I am M. de Marsac,' I explained. And there I stopped, supposing that, as he was in the king's confidence, this would make my errand clear to him.

But I was disappointed. 'Well, sir?' he said, and waited impatiently.

So cold a reception, following such treatment as I had suffered outside, would have sufficed to have dashed my spirits utterly had I not felt the king's letter in my pocket. Being pretty confident, however, that a single glance at this would alter M. du Mornay's bearing for the better, I hastened, looking on it as a kind of talisman, to draw it out and present it to him.

He took it, and looked at it, and opened it, but with so cold and immovable an aspect as made my heart sink more

than all that had gone before. 'What is amiss?' I cried, unable to keep silence. ''Tis from the king, sir.'

'A king in motley!' he answered, his lip curling.

The sense of his words did not at once strike home to me, and I murmured, in great disorder, that the king had sent for me.

'The king knows nothing of it,' was his blunt answer, bluntly given. And he thrust the paper back into my hands. 'It is a trick,' he continued, speaking with the same abruptness, 'for which you have doubtless to thank some of those idle young rascals without. You had sent an application to the king, I suppose? Just so. No doubt they got hold of it, and this is the result. They ought to be whipped.'

It was not possible for me to doubt any longer that what he said was true. I saw in a moment all my hopes vanish, all my plans flung to the winds; and in the first shock of the discovery I could neither find voice to answer him nor strength to withdraw. In a kind of vision I seemed to see my own lean, haggard face looking at me as in a glass, and, reading despair in my eyes, could have pitied myself.

My disorder was so great that M. du Mornay observed it. Looking more closely at me, he two or three times muttered my name, and at last said, 'M. de Marsac? Ha! I remember. You were in the affair of Brouage, were you not?'

I nodded my head in token of assent, being unable at the moment to speak, and so shaken that perforce I leaned against the wall, my head sunk on my breast. The memory of my age, my forty years, and my poverty, pressed hard upon me, filling me with despair and bitterness. I could have wept, but no tears came.

M. du Mornay, averting his eyes from me, took two or three short, impatient turns up and down the chamber. When he addressed me again his tone was full of respect, mingled with such petulance as one brave man might feel, seeing another so hard pressed. 'M. de Marsac,' he said, 'you have my sympathy. It is a shame that men who have

served the cause should be reduced to such straits. Were it possible for me to increase my own train at present, I should consider it an honour to have you with me. But I am hard put to it myself, and so are we all, and the King of Navarre not least among us. He has lived for a month upon a wood which M. de Rosny has cut down. I will mention your name to him, but I should be cruel rather than kind were I not to warn you that nothing can come of it.'

With that he offered me his hand, and, cheered as much by this mark of consideration as by the kindness of his expressions, I rallied my spirits. True, I wanted comfort more substantial, but it was not to be had. I thanked him therefore as becomingly as I could, and seeing there was no help for it, took my leave of him, and slowly and sorrowfully withdrew from the room.

Alas! to escape I had to face the outside world, for which his kind words were an ill preparation. I had to run the gauntlet of the antechamber. The moment I appeared, or rather the moment the door closed behind me, I was hailed with a shout of derision. While one cried, 'Way! way for the gentleman who has seen the king!' another hailed me uproariously as Governor of Guyenne, and a third requested a commission in my regiment.

I heard these taunts with a heart full almost to bursting. It seemed to me an unworthy thing that, merely by reason of my poverty, I should be derided by youths who had still all their battles before them; but to stop or reproach them would only, as I well knew, make matters worse, and, moreover, I was so sore stricken that I had little spirit left even to speak. Accordingly, I made my way through them with what speed I might, my head bent, and my countenance heavy with shame and depression. In this way—I wonder there were not among them some generous enough to pity me—I had nearly gained the door, and was beginning to breathe, when I found my path stopped by that particular young lady of the Court whom I have described

above. Something had for the moment diverted her attention from me, and it required a word from her companions to apprise her of my near neighbourhood. She turned then, as one taken by surprise, and finding me so close to her that my feet all but touched her gown, she stepped quickly aside, and with a glance as cruel as her act, drew her skirts away from contact with me.

The insult stung me, I know not why, more than all the gibes which were being flung at me from every side, and moved by a sudden impulse I stopped, and in the bitterness of my heart spoke to her. 'Mademoiselle,' I said, bowing low—for, as I have stated, she was small, and more like a fairy than a woman, though her face expressed both pride and self-will—'Mademoiselle,' I said sternly, 'such as I am, I have fought for France! Some day you may learn that there are viler things in the world—and have to bear them—than a poor gentleman!'

The words were scarcely out of my mouth before I repented of them, for Mathurine, the fool, who was at my elbow, was quick to turn them into ridicule. Raising her hands above our heads, as in act to bless us, she cried out that Monsieur, having gained so rich an office, desired a bride to grace it; and this, bringing down upon us a coarse shout of laughter and some coarser gibes, I saw the young girl's face flush hotly.

The next moment a voice in the crowd cried roughly, 'Out upon his wedding suit!' and with that a sweetmeat struck me in the face. Another and another followed, covering me with flour and comfits. This was the last straw. For a moment, forgetting where I was, I turned upon them, red and furious, every hair in my moustachios bristling. The next, the full sense of my impotence and of the folly of resentment prevailed with me, and, dropping my head upon my breast, I rushed from the room.

I believe that the younger among them followed me, and that the cry of 'Old Clothes!' pursued me even to the door of my lodgings in the Rue de la Coutellerie. But in the

misery of the moment, and my strong desire to be within doors and alone, I barely noticed this, and am not certain whether it was so or not.

CHAPTER II.

THE KING OF NAVARRE.

I HAVE already referred to the danger with which the alliance between Henry the Third and the League menaced us, an alliance whereof the news, it was said, had blanched the King of Navarre's moustache in a single night. Notwithstanding this, the Court had never shown itself more frolicsome or more free from care than at the time of which I am speaking; even the lack of money seemed for the moment forgotten. One amusement followed another, and though, without doubt, something was doing under the surface—for the wiser of his foes held our prince in particular dread when he seemed most deeply sunk in pleasure—to the outward eye St. Jean d'Angely appeared to be given over to enjoyment from one end to the other.

The stir and bustle of the Court reached me even in my garret, and contributed to make that Christmas, which fell on a Sunday, a trial almost beyond sufferance. All day long the rattle of hoofs on the pavement, and the laughter of riders bent on diversion, came up to me, making the hard stool seem harder, the bare walls more bare, and increasing a hundredfold the solitary gloom in which I sat. For as sunshine deepens the shadows which fall athwart it, and no silence is like that which follows the explosion of a mine, so sadness and poverty are never more intolerable than when hope and wealth rub elbows with them.

True, the great sermon which M. d'Amours preached in the market-house on the morning of Christmas-day cheered me, as it cheered all the more sober spirits. I was present

myself, sitting in an obscure corner of the building, and heard the famous prediction, which was so soon to be fulfilled. 'Sire,' said the preacher, turning to the King of Navarre, and referring, with the boldness that ever characterised that great man and noble Christian, to the attempt then being made to exclude the prince from the succession —'Sire, what God at your birth gave you man cannot take away. A little while, a little patience, and you shall cause us to preach beyond the Loire! With you for our Joshua we shall cross the Jordan, and in the Promised Land the Church shall be set up.'

Words so brave, and so well adapted to encourage the Huguenots in the crisis through which their affairs were then passing, charmed all hearers; save indeed, those—and they were few—who, being devoted to the Vicomte de Turenne, disliked, though they could not controvert, this public acknowledgment of the King of Navarre as the Huguenot leader. The pleasure of those present was evinced in a hundred ways, and to such an extent that even I returned to my chamber soothed and exalted, and found, in dreaming of the speedy triumph of the cause, some compensation for my own ill-fortune.

As the day wore on, however, and the evening brought no change, but presented to me the same dreary prospect with which morning had made me familiar, I confess without shame that my heart sank once more, particularly as I saw that I should be forced in a day or two to sell either my remaining horse or some part of my equipment as essential; a step which I could not contemplate without feelings of the utmost despair. In this state of mind I was adding up by the light of a solitary candle the few coins I had left, when I heard footsteps ascending the stairs. I made them out to be the steps of two persons, and was still lost in conjectures who they might be, when a hand knocked gently at my door.

Fearing another trick, I did not at once open, the more as there was something stealthy and insinuating in the

knock. Thereupon my visitors held a whispered consultation; then they knocked again. I asked loudly who was there, but to this they did not choose to give any answer, while I, on my part, determined not to open until they did. The door was strong, and I smiled grimly at the thought that this time they would have their trouble for their pains.

To my surprise, however, they did not desist, and go away, as I expected, but continued to knock at intervals and whisper much between times. More than once they called me softly by name and bade me open, but as they steadily refrained from saying who they were, I sat still. Occasionally I heard them laugh, but under their breath as it were; and persuaded by this that they were bent on a frolic, I might have persisted in my silence until midnight, which was not more than two hours off, had not a slight sound, as of a rat gnawing behind the wainscot, drawn my attention to the door. Raising my candle and shading my eyes I espied something small and bright protruding beneath it, and sprang up, thinking they were about to prise it in. To my surprise, however, I could discover, on taking the candle to the threshold, nothing more threatening than a couple of gold livres, which had been thrust through the crevice between the door and the floor.

My astonishment may be conceived. I stood for full a minute staring at the coins, the candle in my hand. Then, reflecting that the young sparks at the Court would be very unlikely to spend such a sum on a jest, I hesitated no longer, but putting down the candle, drew the bolt of the door, purposing to confer with my visitors outside. In this, however, I was disappointed, for the moment the door was open they pushed forcibly past me and, entering the room pell-mell, bade me by signs to close the door again.

I did so suspiciously, and without averting my eyes from my visitors. Great were my embarrassment and confusion, therefore, when, the door being shut, they dropped their cloaks one after the other, and I saw before me M. du Mornay and the well-known figure of the King of Navarre.

They seemed so much diverted, looking at one another and laughing, that for a moment I thought some chance resemblance deceived me, and that here were my jokers again. Hence while a man might count ten I stood staring; and the king was the first to speak. 'We have made no mistake, Du Mornay, have we?' he said, casting a laughing glance at me.

'No, sire,' Du Mornay answered. 'This is the Sieur de Marsac, the gentleman whom I mentioned to you.'

I hastened, confused, wondering, and with a hundred apologies, to pay my respects to the king. He speedily cut me short, however, saying, with an air of much kindness, 'Of Marsac, in Brittany, I think, sir?'

'The same, sire.'

'Then you are of the family of Bonne?'

'I am the last survivor of that family, sire,' I answered respectfully.

'It has played its part,' he rejoined. And therewith he took his seat on my stool with an easy grace which charmed me. 'Your motto is "*Bonne foi*," is it not? And Marsac, if I remember rightly, is not far from Rennes, on the Vilaine?'

I answered that it was, adding, with a full heart, that it grieved me to be compelled to receive so great a prince in so poor a lodging.

'Well, I confess,' Du Mornay struck in, looking carelessly round him, 'you have a queer taste, M. de Marsac, in the arrangement of your furniture. You—'

'Mornay!' the king cried sharply.

'Sire?'

'Chut! your elbow is in the candle. Beware of it!'

But I well understood him. If my heart had been full before, it overflowed now. Poverty is not so shameful as the shifts to which it drives men. I had been compelled some days before, in order to make as good a show as possible—since it is the undoubted duty of a gentleman to hide his nakedness from impertinent eyes, and especially from

the eyes of the *canaille*, who are wont to judge from externals—to remove such of my furniture and equipage as remained to that side of the room, which was visible from without when the door was open. This left the farther side of the room vacant and bare. To anyone within doors the artifice was, of course, apparent, and I am bound to say that M. du Mornay's words brought the blood to my brow.

I rejoiced, however, a moment later that he had uttered them; for without them I might never have known, or known so early, the kindness of heart and singular quickness of apprehension which ever distinguished the king, my master. So, in my heart, I began to call him from that hour.

The King of Navarre was at this time thirty-five years old, his hair brown, his complexion ruddy, his moustache, on one side at least, beginning to turn grey. His features, which Nature had cast in a harsh and imperious mould, were relieved by a constant sparkle and animation such as I have never seen in any other man, but in him became ever more conspicuous in gloomy and perilous times. Inured to danger from his earliest youth, he had come to enjoy it as others a festival, hailing its advent with a reckless gaiety which astonished even brave men, and led others to think him the least prudent of mankind. Yet such he was not: nay, he was the opposite of this. Never did Marshal of France make more careful dispositions for a battle—albeit once in it he bore himself like any captain of horse—nor ever did Du Mornay himself sit down to a conference with a more accurate knowledge of affairs. His prodigious wit and the affability of his manners, while they endeared him to his servants, again and again blinded his adversaries; who, thinking that so much brilliance could arise only from a shallow nature, found when it was too late that they had been outwitted by him whom they contemptuously styled the Prince of Béarn, a man a hundredfold more astute than themselves, and master alike of pen and sword.

Much of this, which all the world now knows, I learned afterwards. At the moment I could think of little save the king's kindness; to which he added by insisting that I should sit on the bed while we talked. 'You wonder, M. de Marsac,' he said, 'what brings me here, and why I have come to you instead of sending for you? Still more, perhaps, why I have come to you at night and with such precautions? I will tell you. But first, that my coming may not fill you with false hopes, let me say frankly, that though I may relieve your present necessities, whether you fall into the plan I am going to mention, or not, I cannot take you into my service; wherein, indeed, every post is doubly filled. Du Mornay mentioned your name to me, but in fairness to others I had to answer that I could do nothing.'

I am bound to confess that this strange exordium dashed hopes which had already risen to a high pitch. Recovering myself as quickly as possible, however, I murmured that the honour of a visit from the King of Navarre was sufficient happiness for me.

'Nay, but that honour I must take from you' he replied, smiling; 'though I see that you would make an excellent courtier—far better than Du Mornay here, who never in his life made so pretty a speech. For I must lay my commands on you to keep this visit a secret, M. de Marsac. Should but the slightest whisper of it get abroad, your usefulness, as far as I am concerned, would be gone, and gone for good!'

So remarkable a statement filled me with wonder I could scarcely disguise. It was with difficulty I found words to assure the king that his commands should be faithfully obeyed.

'Of that I am sure,' he answered with the utmost kindness. 'Were I not, and sure, too, from what I am told of your gallantry when my cousin took Brouage, that you are a man of deeds rather than words, I should not be here with the proposition I am going to lay before you. It is

this. I can give you no hope of public employment, M. de Marsac, but I can offer you an adventure—if adventures be to your taste—as dangerous and as thankless as any Amadis ever undertook.'

'As thankless, sire?' I stammered, doubting if I had heard aright, the expression was so strange.

'As thankless,' he answered, his keen eyes seeming to read my soul. 'I am frank with you, you see, sir,' he continued, carelessly. 'I can suggest this adventure—it is for the good of the State—I can do no more. The King of Navarre cannot appear in it, nor can he protect you. Succeed or fail in it, you stand alone. The only promise I make is, that if it ever be safe for me to acknowledge the act, I will reward the doer.'

He paused, and for a few moments I stared at him in sheer amazement. What did he mean? Were he and the other real figures, or was I dreaming?

'Do you understand?' he asked at length, with a touch of impatience.

'Yes, sire, I think I do,' I murmured, very certain in truth and reality that I did not.

'What do you say, then—yes or no?' he rejoined. 'Will you undertake the adventure, or would you hear more before you make up your mind?'

I hesitated. Had I been a younger man by ten years I should doubtless have cried assent there and then, having been all my life ready enough to embark on such enterprises as offered a chance of distinction. But something in the strangeness of the king's preface, although I had it in my heart to die for him, gave me check, and I answered, with an air of great humility, 'You will think me but a poor courtier now, sire, yet he is a fool who jumps into a ditch without measuring the depth. I would fain, if I may say it without disrespect, hear all that you can tell me.'

'Then I fear,' he answered quickly, 'if you would have more light on the matter, my friend, you must get another candle.'

I started, he spoke so abruptly; but perceiving that the candle had indeed burned down to the socket, I rose, with many apologies, and fetched another from the cupboard. It did not occur to me at the moment, though it did later, that the king had purposely sought this opportunity of consulting with his companion. I merely remarked, when I returned to my place on the bed, that they were sitting a little nearer one another, and that the king eyed me before he spoke—though he still swung one foot carelessly in the air—with close attention.

'I speak to you, of course, sir,' he presently went on, 'in confidence, believing you to be an honourable as well as a brave man. That which I wish you to do is briefly, and in a word, to carry off a lady. Nay,' he added quickly, with a laughing grimace, 'have no fear! She is no sweetheart of mine, nor should I go to my grave friend here did I need assistance of that kind. Henry of Bourbon, I pray God, will always be able to free his own lady-love. This is a State affair, and a matter of quite another character, though we cannot at present entrust you with the meaning of it.'

I bowed in silence, feeling somewhat chilled and perplexed, as who would not, having such an invitation before him? I had anticipated an affair with men only—a secret assault or a petard expedition. But seeing the bareness of my room, and the honour the king was doing me, I felt I had no choice, and I answered, 'That being the case, sire, I am wholly at your service.'

'That is well,' he answered briskly, though methought he looked at Du Mornay reproachfully, as doubting his commendation of me. 'But will you say the same,' he continued, removing his eyes to me, and speaking slowly, as though he would try me, 'when I tell you that the lady to be carried off is the ward of the Vicomte de Turenne, whose arm is well-nigh as long as my own, and who would fain make it longer; who never travels, as he told me yesterday, with less than fifty gentlemen, and has a thousand

arquebusiers in his pay? Is the adventure still to your liking, M. de Marsac, now that you know that?'

'It is more to my liking, sire,' I answered stoutly.

'Understand this too,' he rejoined. 'It is essential that this lady, who is at present confined in the Vicomte's house at Chizé, should be released; but it is equally essential that there should be no breach between the Vicomte and myself. Therefore the affair must be the work of an independent man, who has never been in my service, nor in any way connected with me. If captured, you pay the penalty without recourse to me.'

'I fully understand, sire,' I answered.

'Ventre Saint Gris!' he cried, breaking into a low laugh. 'I swear the man is more afraid of the lady than he is of the Vicomte! That is not the way of most of our Court.'

Du Mornay, who had been sitting nursing his knee in silence, pursed up his lips, though it was easy to see that he was well content with the king's approbation. He now intervened. 'With your permission, sire,' he said, 'I will let this gentleman know the details.'

'Do, my friend,' the king answered. 'And be short, for if we are here much longer I shall be missed, and in a twinkling the Court will have found me a new mistress.'

He spoke in jest and with a laugh, but I saw Du Mornay start at the words, as though they were little to his liking; and I learned afterwards that the Court was really much exercised at this time with the question who would be the next favourite, the king's passion for the Countess de la Guiche being evidently on the wane, and that which he presently evinced for Madame de Guercheville being as yet a matter of conjecture.

Du Mornay took no overt notice of the king's words, however, but proceeded to give me my directions. 'Chizé, which you know by name,' he said, 'is six leagues from here. Mademoiselle de la Vire is confined in the north-west room, on the first-floor, overlooking the park. More I cannot tell you, except that her woman's name is Fan-

chette, and that she is to be trusted. The house is well guarded, and you will need four or five men. There are plenty of cut-throats to be hired, only see, M. de Marsac, that they are such as you can manage, and that Mademoiselle takes no hurt among them. Have horses in waiting, and the moment you have released the lady ride north with her as fast as her strength will permit. Indeed, you must not spare her, if Turenne be on your heels. You should be across the Loire in sixty hours after leaving Chizé.'

'Across the Loire?' I exclaimed in astonishment.

'Yes, sir, across the Loire,' he replied, with some sternness. 'Your task, be good enough to understand, is to convoy Mademoiselle de la Vire with all speed to Blois. There, attracting as little notice as may be, you will inquire for the Baron de Rosny at the Bleeding Heart, in the Rue de St. Denys. He will take charge of the lady, or direct you how to dispose of her, and your task will then be accomplished. You follow me?'

'Perfectly,' I answered, speaking in my turn with some dryness. 'But Mademoiselle I understand is young. What if she will not accompany me, a stranger, entering her room at night, and by the window?'

'That has been thought of' was the answer. He turned to the King of Navarre, who, after a moment's search, produced a small object from his pouch. This he gave to his companion, and the latter transferred it to me. I took it with curiosity. It was the half of a gold carolus, the broken edge of the coin being rough and jagged. 'Show that to Mademoiselle, my friend,' Du Mornay continued, 'and she will accompany you. She has the other half.'

'But be careful,' Henry added eagerly, 'to make no mention, even to her, of the King of Navarre. You mark me, M. de Marsac! If you have at any time occasion to speak of me, you may have the honour of calling me *your friend*, and referring to me always in the same manner.'

This he said with so gracious an air that I was charmed, and thought myself happy indeed to be addressed in this

wise by a prince whose name was already so glorious. Nor was my satisfaction diminished when his companion drew out a bag containing, as he told me, three hundred crowns in gold, and placed it in my hands, bidding me defray therefrom the cost of the journey. 'Be careful, however,' he added earnestly, 'to avoid, in hiring your men, any appearance of wealth, lest the adventure seem to be suggested by some outside person; instead of being dictated by the desperate state of your own fortunes. Promise rather than give, so far as that will avail. And for what you must give, let each livre seem to be the last in your pouch.'

Henry nodded assent. 'Excellent advice!' he muttered, rising and drawing on his cloak, 'such as you ever give me, Mornay, and I as seldom take—more's the pity! But, after all, of little avail without this.' He lifted my sword from the table as he spoke, and weighed it in his hand. 'A pretty tool,' he continued, turning suddenly and looking me very closely in the face. 'A very pretty tool. Were I in your place, M. de Marsac, I would see that it hung loose in the scabbard. Ay, and more, man, use it!' he added, sinking his voice and sticking out his chin, while his grey eyes, looking ever closer into mine, seemed to grow cold and hard as steel. 'Use it to the last, for if you fall into Turenne's hands, God help you! I cannot!'

'If I am taken, sire,' I answered, trembling, but not with fear, 'my fate be on my own head.'

I saw the king's eyes soften at that, and his face change so swiftly that I scarce knew him for the same man. He let the weapon drop with a clash on the table. 'Ventre Saint Gris!' he exclaimed with a strange thrill of yearning in his tone. 'I swear by God, I would I were in your shoes, sir. To strike a blow or two with no care what came of it. To take the road with a good horse and a good sword, and see what fortune would send. To be rid of all this statecraft and protocolling, and never to issue another declaration in this world, but just to be for once a Gentleman of France, with all to win and nothing to lose save the

love of my lady! Ah! Mornay, would it not be sweet to leave all this fret and fume, and ride away to the green woods by Coarraze?'

'Certainly, if you prefer them to the Louvre, sire,' Du Mornay answered drily; while I stood, silent and amazed, before this strange man, who could so suddenly change from grave to gay, and one moment spoke so sagely, and the next like any wild lad in his teens. 'Certainly,' he answered, 'if that be your choice, sire; and if you think that even there the Duke of Guise will leave you in peace. Turenne, I am sure, will be glad to hear of your decision. Doubtless he will be elected Protector of the Churches. Nay, sire, for shame!' Du Mornay continued, almost with sternness. 'Would you leave France, which at odd times I have heard you say you loved, to shift for herself? Would you deprive her of the only man who does love her for her own sake?'

'Well, well, but she is such a fickle sweetheart, my friend,' the king answered, laughing, the side glance of his eye on me. 'Never was one so coy or so hard to clip! And, besides, has not the Pope divorced us?'

'The Pope! A fig for the Pope!' Du Mornay rejoined with impatient heat. 'What has he to do with France? An impertinent meddler, and an Italian to boot! I would he and all the brood of them were sunk a hundred fathoms deep in the sea. But, meantime, I would send him a text to digest.'

'*Exemplum?*' said the king.

'Whom God has joined together let no man put asunder.'

'Amen!' quoth Henry softly. 'And France is a fair and comely bride.'

After that he kept such a silence, falling as it seemed to me into a brown study, that he went away without so much as bidding me farewell, or being conscious, as far as I could tell, of my presence. Du Mornay exchanged a few words with me, to assure himself that I understood what I had to do, and then, with many kind expressions, which I did not

fail to treasure up and con over in the times that were coming, hastened downstairs after his master.

My joy when I found myself alone may be conceived. Yet was it no ecstasy, but a sober exhilaration; such as stirred my pulses indeed, and bade me once more face the world with a firm eye and an assured brow, but was far from holding out before me a troubadour's palace or any dazzling prospect. The longer I dwelt on the interview, the more clearly I saw the truth. As the glamour which Henry's presence and singular kindness had cast over me began to lose some of its power, I recognised more and more surely why he had come to me. It was not out of any special favour for one whom he knew by report only, if at all by name; but because he had need of a man poor, and therefore reckless, middle-aged (of which comes discretion), obscure—therefore a safe instrument; to crown all, a gentleman, seeing that both a secret and a woman were in question.

Withal I wondered too. Looking from the bag of money on the table to the broken coin in my hand, I scarcely knew which to admire more: the confidence which entrusted the one to a man broken and beggared, or the courage of the gentlewoman who should accompany me on the faith of the other.

CHAPTER III.

BOOT AND SADDLE.

As was natural, I meditated deeply and far into the night on the difficulties of the task entrusted to me. I saw that it fell into two parts: the release of the lady, and her safe conduct to Blois, a distance of sixty leagues. The release I thought it probable I could effect single-handed, or with one companion only; but in the troubled condition of the country at this time, more particularly on both sides of the

Loire, I scarcely saw how I could ensure a lady's safety on the road northwards unless I had with me at least five swords.

To get these together at a few hours' notice promised to be no easy task; although the presence of the Court of Navarre had filled St. Jean with a crowd of adventurers. Yet the king's command was urgent, and at some sacrifice, even at some risk, must be obeyed. Pressed by these considerations, I could think of no better man to begin with than Fresnoy.

His character was bad, and he had long forfeited such claim as he had ever possessed—I believe it was a misty one, on the distaff side—to gentility. But the same cause which had rendered me destitute—I mean the death of the Prince of Condé—had stripped him to the last rag; and this, perhaps, inclining me to serve him, I was the more quick to see his merits. I knew him already for a hardy, reckless man, very capable of striking a shrewd blow. I gave him credit for being trusty, as long as his duty jumped with his interest.

Accordingly, as soon as it was light, having fed and groomed the Cid, which was always the first employment of my day, I set out in search of Fresnoy, and was presently lucky enough to find him taking his morning draught outside the 'Three Pigeons,' a little inn not far from the north gate. It was more than a fortnight since I had set eyes on him, and the lapse of time had worked so great a change for the worse in him that, forgetting my own shabbiness, I looked at him askance, as doubting the wisdom of enlisting one who bore so plainly the marks of poverty and dissipation. His great face—he was a large man—had suffered recent ill-usage, and was swollen and discoloured, one eye being as good as closed. He was unshaven, his hair was ill-kempt, his doublet unfastened at the throat, and torn and stained besides. Despite the cold—for the morning was sharp and frosty, though free from wind—there were half a dozen packmen drinking and squabbling

before the inn, while the beasts they drove quenched their thirst at the trough. But these men seemed with one accord to leave him in possession of the bench at which he sat; nor did I wonder much at this when I saw the morose and savage glance which he shot at me as I approached. Whether he read my first impressions in my face, or for some other reason felt distaste for my company, I could not determine. But, undeterred by his behaviour, I sat down beside him and called for wine.

He nodded sulkily in answer to my greeting, and cast a half-shamed, half-angry look at me out of the corners of his eyes. 'You need not look at me as though I were a dog,' he muttered presently. 'You are not so very spruce yourself, my friend. But I suppose you have grown proud since you got that fat appointment at Court!' And he laughed out loud, so that I confess I was in two minds whether I should not force the jest down his ugly throat.

However I restrained myself, though my cheeks burned. 'You have heard about it, then,' I said, striving to speak indifferently.

'Who has not?' he said, laughing with his lips, though his eyes were far from merry. 'The Sieur de Marsac's appointment! Ha! ha! Why, man——'

'Enough of it now!' I exclaimed. And I dare say I writhed on my seat. 'As far as I am concerned the jest is a stale one, sir, and does not amuse me.'

'But it amuses me,' he rejoined with a grin.

'Let it be, nevertheless,' I said; and I think he read a warning in my eyes. 'I have come to speak to you upon another matter.'

He did not refuse to listen, but threw one leg over the other, and looking up at the inn-sign began to whistle in a rude, offensive manner. Still, having an object in view, I controlled myself and continued. 'It is this, my friend: money is not very plentiful at present with either of us.'

Before I could say any more he turned on me savagely, and with a loud oath thrust his bloated face, flushed with

passion, close to mine. 'Now look here, M. de Marsac!' he cried violently, 'once for all, it is no good! I have not got the money, and I cannot pay it. I said a fortnight ago, when you lent it, that you should have it this week. Well,' slapping his hand on the bench, 'I have not got it, and it is no good beginning upon me. You cannot have it, and that is flat!'

'Damn the money!' I cried.

'What?' he exclaimed, scarcely believing his ears.

'Let the money be!' I repeated fiercely. 'Do you hear? I have not come about it. I am here to offer you work—good, well-paid work—if you will enlist with me and play me fair, Fresnoy.'

'Play fair!' he cried with an oath.

'There, there,' I said, 'I am willing to let bygones be bygones if you are. The point is, that I have an adventure on hand, and, wanting help, can pay you for it.'

He looked at me cunningly, his eye travelling over each rent and darn in my doublet. 'I will help you fast enough,' he said at last. 'But I should like to see the money first.'

'You shall,' I answered.

'Then I am with you, my friend. Count on me till death!' he cried, rising and laying his hand in mine with a boisterous frankness which did not deceive me into trusting him far. 'And now, whose is the affair, and what is it?'

'The affair is mine,' I said coldly. 'It is to carry off a lady.'

He whistled and looked me over again, an impudent leer in his eyes. 'A lady?' he exclaimed. 'Umph! I could understand a young spark going in for such—but that's your affair. Who is it?'

'That is my affair, too,' I answered coolly, disgusted by the man's venality and meanness, and fully persuaded that I must trust him no farther than the length of my sword. 'All I want you to do, M. Fresnoy,' I continued stiffly, 'is to place yourself at my disposal and under my orders for ten days. I will find you a horse and pay you—the enter

prise is a hazardous one, and I take that into account—two gold crowns a day, and ten more if we succeed in reaching a place of safety.'

'Such a place as——'

'Never mind that,' I replied. 'The question is, do you accept?'

He looked down sullenly, and I could see he was greatly angered by my determination to keep the matter to myself. 'Am I to know no more than that?' he asked, digging the point of his scabbard again and again into the ground.

'No more,' I answered firmly. 'I am bent on a desperate attempt to mend my fortunes before they fall as low as yours; and that is as much as I mean to tell living man. If you are loth to risk your life with your eyes shut, say so, and I will go to someone else.'

But he was not in a position, as I well knew, to refuse such an offer, and presently he accepted it with a fresh semblance of heartiness. I told him I should want four troopers to escort us, and these he offered to procure, saying that he knew just the knaves to suit me. I bade him hire two only, however, being too wise to put myself altogether in his hands; and then, having given him money to buy himself a horse—I made it a term that the men should bring their own—and named a rendezvous for the first hour after noon, I parted from him and went rather sadly away.

For I began to see that the king had not underrated the dangers of an enterprise on which none but desperate men and such as were down in the world could be expected to embark. Seeing this, and also a thing which followed clearly from it—that I should have as much to fear from my own company as from the enemy—I looked forward with little hope to a journey during every day and every hour of which I must bear a growing weight of fear and responsibility.

It was too late to turn back, however, and I went about my preparations, if with little cheerfulness, at least with steadfast purpose. I had my sword ground and my pistols

put in order by the cutler over whom I lodged, and who performed this last office for me with the same goodwill which had characterised all his dealings with me. I sought out and hired a couple of stout fellows whom I believed to be indifferently honest, but who possessed the advantage of having horses; and besides bought two led horses myself for mademoiselle and her woman. Such other equipments as were absolutely necessary I purchased, reducing my stock of money in this way to two hundred and ten crowns. How to dispose of this sum so that it might be safe and yet at my command was a question which greatly exercised me. In the end I had recourse to my friend the cutler, who suggested hiding a hundred crowns of it in my cap, and deftly contrived a place for the purpose. This, the cap being lined with steel, was a matter of no great difficulty. A second hundred I sewed up in the stuffing of my saddle, placing the remainder in my pouch for present necessities.

A small rain was falling in the streets when, a little after noon, I started with my two knaves behind me and made for the north gate. So many were moving this way and the other that we passed unnoticed, and might have done so had we numbered six swords instead of three. When we reached the rendezvous, a mile beyond the gate, we found Fresnoy already there, taking shelter in the lee of a big holly-tree. He had four horsemen with him, and on our appearance rode forward to meet us, crying heartily, 'Welcome, M. le Capitaine!'

'Welcome, certainly,' I answered, pulling the Cid up sharply, and holding off from him. 'But who are these, M. Fresnoy?' and I pointed with my riding-cane to his four companions.

He tried to pass the matter off with a laugh. 'Oh! these?' he said. 'That is soon explained. The Evangelists would not be divided, so I brought them all—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—thinking it likely you might fail to secure your men. And I will warrant them for four as gallant boys as you will ever find behind you!'

They were certainly four as arrant ruffians as I had ever seen before me, and I saw I must not hesitate. 'Two or none, M. Fresnoy,' I said firmly. 'I gave you a commission for two, and two I will take—Matthew and Mark, or Luke and John, as you please.'

''Tis a pity to break the party,' said he, scowling.

'If that be all,' I retorted, 'one of my men is called John. And we will dub the other Luke, if that will mend the matter.'

'The Prince of Condé,' he muttered sullenly, 'employed these men.'

'The Prince of Condé employed some queer people sometimes, M. Fresnoy,' I answered, looking him straight between the eyes, 'as we all must. A truce to this, if you please. We will take Matthew and Mark. The other two be good enough to dismiss.'

He seemed to waver for a moment, as if he had a mind to disobey, but in the end, thinking better of it, he bade the men return; and as I complimented each of them with a piece of silver, they went off, after some swearing, in tolerably good humour. Thereon Fresnoy was for taking the road at once, but having no mind to be followed, I gave the word to wait until the two were out of sight.

I think, as we sat our horses in the rain, the holly-bush not being large enough to shelter us all, we were as sorry a band as ever set out to rescue a lady; nor was it without pain that I looked round and saw myself reduced to command such people. There was scarcely one whole unpatched garment among us, and three of my squires had but a spur apiece. To make up for this deficiency we mustered two black eyes, Fresnoy's included, and a broken nose. Matthew's nag lacked a tail, and, more remarkable still, its rider, as I presently discovered, was stone-deaf; while Mark's sword was innocent of a scabbard, and his bridle was plain rope. One thing, indeed, I observed with pleasure. The two men who had come with me looked askance at the two who had come with Fresnoy, and these

returned the stare with interest. On this division and on the length of my sword I based all my hopes of safety and of something more. On it I was about to stake, not my own life only—which was no great thing, seeing what my prospects were—but the life and honour of a woman, young, helpless, and as yet unknown to me.

Weighed down as I was by these considerations, I had to bear the additional burden of hiding my fears and suspicions under a cheerful demeanour. I made a short speech to my following, who one and all responded by swearing to stand by me to the death. I then gave the word, and we started, Fresnoy and I leading the way, Luke and John with the led horses following, and the other two bringing up the rear.

The rain continuing to fall and the country in this part being dreary and monotonous, even in fair weather, I felt my spirits sink still lower as the day advanced. The responsibility I was going to incur assumed more serious proportions each time I scanned my following; while Fresnoy, plying me with perpetual questions respecting my plans, was as uneasy a companion as my worst enemy could have wished me.

'Come!' he grumbled presently, when we had covered four leagues or so, 'you have not told me yet, sieur, where we stay to-night. You are travelling so slowly that——'

'I am saving the horses,' I answered shortly. 'We shall do a long day to-morrow.'

'Yours looks fit for a week of days,' he sneered, with an evil look at my Sardinian, which was, indeed, in better case than its master. 'It is sleek enough, any way!'

'It is as good as it looks,' I answered, a little nettled by his tone.

'There is a better here,' he responded.

'I don't see it,' I said. I had already eyed the nags all round, and assured myself that, ugly and blemished as they were, they were up to their work. But I had discerned no special merit among them. I looked them over again now,

and came to the same conclusion—that, except the led horses, which I had chosen with some care, there was nothing among them to vie with the Cid, either in speed or looks. I told Fresnoy so.

'Would you like to try?' he said tauntingly.

I laughed, adding, 'If you think I am going to tire our horses by racing them, with such work as we have before us, you are mistaken, Fresnoy. I am not a boy, you know.'

'There need be no question of racing,' he answered more quietly. 'You have only to get on that rat-tailed bay of Matthew's to feel its paces and say I am right.'

I looked at the bay, a bald-faced, fiddle-headed horse, and saw that, with no signs of breeding, it was still a big-boned animal with good shoulders and powerful hips. I thought it possible Fresnoy might be right, and if so, and the bay's manners were tolerable, it might do for mademoiselle better than the horse I had chosen. At any rate, if we had a fast horse among us, it was well to know the fact, so bidding Matthew change with me, and be careful of the Cid, I mounted the bay, and soon discovered that its paces were easy and promised speed, while its manners seemed as good as even a timid rider could desire.

Our road at the time lay across a flat desolate heath, dotted here and there with thorn-bushes; the track being broken and stony, extended more than a score of yards in width, through travellers straying to this side and that to escape the worst places. Fresnoy and I, in making the change, had fallen slightly behind the other three, and were riding abreast of Matthew on the Cid.

'Well,' he said, 'was I not right?'

'In part,' I answered. 'The horse is better than its looks.'

'Like many others,' he rejoined, a spark of resentment in his tone—'men as well as horses, M. de Marsac. But what do you say? Shall we canter on a little and overtake the others?'

Thinking it well to do so, I assented readily, and we started together. We had ridden, however, no more than a hundred yards, and I was only beginning to extend the bay, when Fresnoy, slightly drawing rein, turned in his saddle and looked back. The next moment he cried, 'Hallo! what is this? Those fellows are not following us, are they?'

I turned sharply to look. At that moment, without falter or warning, the bay horse went down under me as if shot dead, throwing me half a dozen yards over its head; and that so suddenly that I had no time to raise my arms, but, falling heavily on my head and shoulder, lost consciousness.

I have had many falls, but no other to vie with that in utter unexpectedness. When I recovered my senses I found myself leaning, giddy and sick, against the bole of an old thorn-tree. Fresnoy and Matthew supported me on either side, and asked me how I found myself; while the other three men, their forms black against the stormy evening sky, sat their horses a few paces in front of me. I was too much dazed at first to see more, and this only in a mechanical fashion; but gradually, my brain grew clearer, and I advanced from wondering who the strangers round me were to recognising them, and finally to remembering what had happened to me.

'Is the horse hurt?' I muttered as soon as I could speak.

'Not a whit,' Fresnoy answered, chuckling, or I was much mistaken. 'I am afraid you came off the worse of the two, captain.'

He exchanged a look with the men on horseback as he spoke, and in a dull fashion I fancied I saw them smile. One even laughed, and another turned in his saddle as if to hide his face. I had a vague general sense that there was some joke on foot in which I had no part. But I was too much shaken at the moment to be curious, and gratefully accepted the offer of one of the men to fetch me a little water. While he was away the rest stood round me, the

same look of ill-concealed drollery on their faces. Fresnoy alone talked, speaking volubly of the accident, pouring out expressions of sympathy and cursing the road, the horse, and the wintry light until the water came; when, much refreshed by the draught, I managed to climb to the Cid's saddle and plod slowly onwards with them.

'A bad beginning,' Fresnoy said presently, stealing a sly glance at me as we jogged along side by side, Chizé half a league before us, and darkness not far off.

By this time, however, I was myself again, save for a little humming in the head, and, shrugging my shoulders, I told him so. 'All's well that ends well,' I added. 'Not that it was a pleasant fall, or that I wish to have such another.'

'No, I should think not,' he answered. His face was turned from me, but I fancied I heard him snigger.

Something, which may have been a vague suspicion, led me a moment later to put my hand into my pouch. Then I understood. I understood too well. The sharp surprise of the discovery was such that involuntarily I drove my spurs into the Cid, and the horse sprang forward.

'What is the matter?' Fresnoy asked.

'The matter?' I echoed, my hand still at my belt, feeling —feeling hopelessly.

'Yes, what is it?' he asked, a brazen smile on his rascally face.

I looked at him, my brow as red as fire. 'Oh! nothing —nothing,' I said. 'Let us trot on.'

In truth I had discovered that, taking advantage of my helplessness, the scoundrels had robbed me, while I lay insensible, of every gold crown in my purse! Nor was this all, or the worst, for I saw at once that in doing so they had effected something which was a thousandfold more ominous and formidable—established against me that secret understanding which it was my especial aim to prevent, and on the absence of which I had been counting. Nay, I saw that for my very life I had only my friend the cutler and

my own prudence to thank, seeing that these rogues would certainly have murdered me without scruple had they succeeded in finding the bulk of my money. Baffled in this, while still persuaded that I had other resources, they had stopped short of that villany—or this memoir had never been written. They had kindly permitted me to live until a more favourable opportunity of enriching themselves at my expense should put them in possession of my last crown!

Though I was sufficiently master of myself to refrain from complaints which I felt must be useless, and from menaces which it has never been my habit to utter unless I had also the power to put them into execution, it must not be imagined that I did not, as I rode on by Fresnoy's side, feel my position acutely or see how absurd a figure I cut in my dual character of leader and dupe. Indeed, the reflection that, being in this perilous position, I was about to stake another's safety as well as my own, made me feel the need of a few minutes' thought so urgent that I determined to gain them, even at the risk of leaving my men at liberty to plot further mischief. Coming almost immediately afterwards within sight of the turrets of the Château of Chizé, I told Fresnoy that we should lie the night at the village; and bade him take the men on and secure quarters at the inn. Attacked instantly by suspicion and curiosity, he demurred stoutly to leaving me, and might have persisted in his refusal had I not pulled up, and clearly shown him that I would have my own way in this case or come to an open breach. He shrank, as I expected, from the latter alternative, and, bidding me a sullen adieu, trotted on with his troop. I waited until they were out of sight, and then, turning the Cid's head, crossed a small brook which divided the road from the chase, and choosing a ride which seemed to pierce the wood in the direction of the Château, proceeded down it, keeping a sharp look-out on either hand.

It was then, my thoughts turning to the lady who was now so near, and who, noble, rich, and a stranger, seemed, as I approached her, not the least formidable of the embar-

rassments before me—it was then that I made a discovery which sent a cold shiver through my frame, and in a moment swept all memory of my paltry ten crowns from my head. Ten crowns! Alas! I had lost that which was worth all my crowns put together—the broken coin which the King of Navarre had entrusted to me, and which formed my sole credential, my only means of persuading Mademoiselle de la Vire that I came from him. I had put it in my pouch, and of course, though the loss of it only came home to my mind now, it had disappeared with the rest.

I drew rein and sat for some time motionless, the image of despair. The wind which stirred the naked boughs overhead, and whirled the dead leaves in volleys past my feet, and died away at last among the whispering bracken, met nowhere with wretchedness greater, I believe, than was mine at that moment.

CHAPTER IV.

MADEMOISELLE DE LA VIRE.

My first desperate impulse on discovering the magnitude of my loss was to ride after the knaves and demand the token at the sword's point. The certainty, however, of finding them united, and the difficulty of saying which of the five possessed what I wanted, led me to reject this plan as I grew cooler; and since I did not dream, even in this dilemma, of abandoning the expedition, the only alternative seemed to be to act as if I still had the broken coin, and essay what a frank explanation might effect when the time came.

After some wretched, very wretched, moments of debate, I resolved to adopt this course; and, for the present, thinking I might gain some knowledge of the surroundings while the light lasted, I pushed cautiously forward through the

trees and came in less than five minutes within sight of a corner of the chateau, which I found to be a modern building of the time of Henry II., raised, like the houses of that time, for pleasure rather than defence, and decorated with many handsome casements and tourelles. Despite this, it wore, as I saw it, a grey and desolate air, due in part to the loneliness of the situation and the lateness of the hour; and in part, I think, to the smallness of the household maintained, for no one was visible on the terrace or at the windows. The rain dripped from the trees, which on two sides pressed so closely on the house as almost to darken the rooms, and everything I saw encouraged me to hope that mademoiselle's wishes would second my entreaties, and incline her to lend a ready ear to my story.

The appearance of the house, indeed, was a strong inducement to me to proceed, for it was impossible to believe that a young lady, a kinswoman of the gay and vivacious Turenne, and already introduced to the pleasures of the Court, would elect of her own free will to spend the winter in so dreary a solitude.

Taking advantage of the last moments of daylight, I rode cautiously round the house, and, keeping in the shadow of the trees, had no difficulty in discovering at the north-east corner the balcony of which I had been told. It was semicircular in shape, with a stone balustrade, and hung some fifteen feet above a terraced walk which ran below it, and was separated from the chase by a low sunk fence.

I was surprised to observe that, notwithstanding the rain and the coldness of the evening, the window which gave upon this balcony was open. Nor was this all. Luck was in store for me at last. I had not gazed at the window more than a minute, calculating its height and other particulars, when, to my great joy, a female figure, closely hooded, stepped out and stood looking up at the sky. I was too far off to be able to discern by that uncertain light whether this was Mademoiselle de la Vire or her woman; but the attitude was so clearly one of dejection and despon-

dency, that I felt sure it was either one or the other. Determined not to let the opportunity slip, I dismounted hastily and, leaving the Cid loose, advanced on foot until I stood within half-a-dozen paces of the window.

At that point the watcher became aware of me. She started back, but did not withdraw. Still peering down at me, she called softly to some one inside the chamber, and immediately a second figure, taller and stouter, appeared. I had already doffed my cap, and I now, in a low voice, begged to know if I had the honour of speaking to Mademoiselle de la Vire. In the growing darkness it was impossible to distinguish faces.

'Hush!' the stouter figure muttered in a tone of warning. 'Speak lower. Who are you, and what do you here?'

'I am here,' I answered respectfully, 'commissioned by a friend of the lady I have named, to convey her to a place of safety.'

'Mon dieu!' was the sharp answer. 'Now? It is impossible.'

'No,' I murmured, 'not now, but to-night. The moon rises at half-past two. My horses need rest and food. At three I will be below this window with the means of escape, if mademoiselle choose to use them.'

I felt that they were staring at me through the dusk, as though they would read my breast. 'Your name, sir?' the shorter figure murmured at last, after a pause which was full of suspense and excitement.

'I do not think my name of much import at present, Mademoiselle,' I answered, reluctant to proclaim myself a stranger. 'When——'

'Your name, your name, sir!' she repeated imperiously, and I heard her little heel rap upon the stone floor of the balcony.

'Gaston de Marsac,' I answered unwillingly.

They both started, and cried out together. 'Impossible!' the last speaker exclaimed, amazement and anger in her tone. 'This is a jest, sir. This——'

What more she would have said I was left to guess, for at that moment her attendant—I had no doubt now which was mademoiselle and which Fanchette—suddenly laid her hand on her mistress's mouth and pointed to the room behind them. A second's suspense, and with a warning gesture the two turned and disappeared through the window.

I lost no time in regaining the shelter of the trees; and concluding, though I was far from satisfied with the interview, that I could do nothing more now, but might rather, by loitering in the neighbourhood, awaken suspicion, I remounted and made for the highway and the village, where I found my men in noisy occupation of the inn, a poor place, with unglazed windows, and a fire in the middle of the earthen floor. My first care was to stable the Cid in a shed at the back, where I provided for its wants as far as I could with the aid of a half-naked boy, who seemed to be in hiding there.

This done, I returned to the front of the house, having pretty well made up my mind how I would set about the task before me. As I passed one of the windows, which was partially closed by a rude curtain made of old sacks, I stopped to look in. Fresnoy and his four rascals were seated on blocks of wood round the hearth, talking loudly and fiercely, and ruffling it as if the fire and the room were their own. A pedlar, seated on his goods in one corner, was eyeing them with evident fear and suspicion; in another corner two children had taken refuge under a donkey, which some fowls had chosen as a roosting-pole. The innkeeper, a sturdy fellow, with a great club in his fist, sat moodily at the foot of a ladder which led to the loft above, while a slatternly woman, who was going to and fro getting supper, seemed in equal terror of her guests and her good man.

Confirmed by what I saw, and assured that the villains were ripe for any mischief, and, if not checked, would speedily be beyond my control, I noisily flung the door

open and entered. Fresnoy looked up with a sneer as I did so, and one of the men laughed. The others became silent; but no one moved or greeted me. Without a moment's hesitation I stepped to the nearest fellow and, with a sturdy kick, sent his log from under him. 'Rise, you rascal, when I enter!' I cried, giving vent to the anger I had long felt. 'And you, too!' and with a second kick I sent his neighbour's stool flying also, and administered a couple of cuts with my riding-cane across the man's shoulders. 'Have you no manners, sirrah? Across with you, and leave this side to your betters.'

The two rose, snarling and feeling for their weapons, and for a moment stood facing me, looking now at me and now askance at Fresnoy. But as he gave no sign, and their comrades only laughed, the men's courage failed them at the pinch, and with a very poor grace they sneaked over to the other side of the fire and sat there scowling.

I seated myself beside their leader. 'This gentleman and I will eat here,' I cried to the man at the foot of the ladder. 'Bid your wife lay for us, and of the best you have; and do you give those knaves their provender where the smell of their greasy jackets will not come between us and our victuals.'

The man came forward, glad enough, as I saw, to discover any one in authority, and very civilly began to draw wine and place a board for us, while his wife filled our platters from the black pot which hung over the fire. Fresnoy's face meanwhile wore the amused smile of one who comprehended my motives, but felt sufficiently sure of his position and influence with his followers to be indifferent to my proceedings. I presently showed him, however, that I had not yet done with him. Our table was laid in obedience to my orders at such a distance from the men that they could not overhear our talk, and by-and-by I leant over to him.

'M. Fresnoy,' I said, 'you are in danger of forgetting one thing, I fancy, which it behoves you to remember.'

'What?' he muttered, scarcely deigning to look up at me.

'That you have to do with Gaston de Marsac,' I answered quietly. 'I am making, as I told you this morning, a last attempt to recruit my fortunes, and I will let no man—no man, do you understand, M. Fresnoy?—thwart me and go harmless.'

'Who wishes to thwart you?' he asked impudently.

'You,' I answered unmoved, helping myself, as I spoke, from the roll of black bread which lay beside me. 'You robbed me this afternoon; I passed it over. You encouraged those men to be insolent; I passed it over. But let me tell you this. If you fail me to-night, on the honour of a gentleman, M. Fresnoy, I will run you through as I would spit a lark.'

'Will you? But two can play at that game,' he cried, rising nimbly from his stool. 'Still better six! Don't you think, M. de Marsac, you had better have waited——?'

'I think you had better hear one word more,' I answered coolly, keeping my seat, 'before you appeal to your fellows there.'

'Well,' he said, still standing, 'what is it?'

'Nay,' I replied, after once more pointing to his stool in vain, 'if you prefer to take my orders standing, well and good.'

'Your orders?' he shrieked, growing suddenly excited.

'Yes, my orders!' I retorted, rising as suddenly to my feet and hitching forward my sword. 'My orders, sir,' I repeated fiercely, 'or, if you dispute my right to command as well as to pay this party, let us decide the question here and now—you and I, foot to foot, M. Fresnoy.'

The quarrel flashed up so suddenly, though I had been preparing it all along, that no one moved. The woman, indeed, fell back to her children, but the rest looked on open-mouthed. Had they stirred, or had a moment's hurly-burly heated his blood, I doubt not Fresnoy would have taken up my challenge, for he did not lack hardihood. But as it was, face to face with me in the silence, his cour-

age failed him. He paused, glowering at me uncertainly, and did not speak.

'Well,' I said, 'don't you think that if I pay I ought to give orders, sir?'

'Who wishes to oppose your orders?' he muttered, drinking off a bumper, and sitting down with an air of impudent bravado, assumed to hide his discomfiture.

'If you don't, no one else does,' I answered. 'So that is settled. Landlord, some more wine.'

He was very sulky with me for a while, fingering his glass in silence and scowling at the table. He had enough gentility to feel the humiliation to which he had exposed himself, and a sufficiency of wit to understand that that moment's hesitation had cost him the allegiance of his fellow-ruffians. I hastened, therefore, to set him at his ease by explaining my plans for the night, and presently succeeded beyond my hopes; for when he heard who the lady was whom I proposed to carry off, and that she was lying that evening at the Chateau de Chizé, his surprise swept away the last trace of resentment. He stared at me as at a maniac.

'Mon Dieu!' he exclaimed. 'Do you know what you are doing, Sieur?'

'I think so,' I answered.

'Do you know to whom the chateau belongs?'

'To the Vicomte de Turenne.'

'And that Mademoiselle de la Vire is his relation?'

'Yes,' I said.

'Mon Dieu!' he exclaimed again. And he looked at me open-mouthed.

'What is the matter?' I asked, though I had an uneasy consciousness that I knew—that I knew very well.

'Man, he will crush you as I crush this hat!' he answered in great excitement. 'As easily. Who do you think will protect you from him in a private quarrel of this kind? Navarre? France? our good man? Not one of them. You had better steal the king's crown jewels—he is weak;

or Guise's last plot—he is generous at times; or Navarre's last sweetheart—he is as easy as an old shoe. You had better have to do with all these together, I tell you, than touch Turenne's ewe-lambs, unless your aim be to be broken on the wheel! Mon Dieu, yes!'

'I am much obliged to you for your advice,' I said stiffly, 'but the die is cast. My mind is made up. On the other hand, if you are afraid, M. Fresnoy——'

'I am afraid; very much afraid,' he answered frankly.

'Still your name need not be brought into the matter,' I replied, 'I will take the responsibility. I will let them know my name here at the inn, where, doubtless, inquiries will be made.'

'To be sure, that is something,' he answered thoughtfully. 'Well, it is an ugly business, but I am in for it. You want me to go with you a little after two, do you? and the others to be in the saddle at three? Is that it?'

I assented, pleased to find him so far acquiescent; and in this way, talking the details over more than once, we settled our course, arranging to fly by way of Poitiers and Tours. Of course I did not tell him why I selected Blois as our refuge, nor what was my purpose there; though he pressed me more than once on the point, and grew thoughtful and somewhat gloomy when I continually evaded it. A little after eight we retired to the loft to sleep; our men remaining below round the fire and snoring so merrily as almost to shake the crazy old building. The host was charged to sit up and call us as soon as the moon rose, but, as it turned out, I might as well have taken this office on myself, for between excitement and distrust I slept little, and was wide awake when I heard his step on the ladder and knew it was time to rise.

I was up in a moment, and Fresnoy was little behind me; so that, losing no time in talk, we were mounted and on the road, each with a spare horse at his knee, before the moon was well above the trees. Once in the Chase we found it necessary to proceed on foot, but, the distance being short,

we presently emerged without misadventure and stood opposite to the chateau, the upper part of which shone cold and white in the moon's rays.

There was something so solemn in the aspect of the place, the night being fine and the sky without a cloud, that I stood for a minute awed and impressed, the sense of the responsibility I was here to accept strong upon me. In that short space of time all the dangers before me, as well the common risks of the road as the vengeance of Turenne and the turbulence of my own men, presented themselves to my mind, and made a last appeal to me to turn back from an enterprise so foolhardy. The blood in a man's veins runs low and slow at that hour, and mine was chilled by lack of sleep and the wintry air. It needed the remembrance of my solitary condition, of my past spent in straits and failure, of the grey hairs which swept my cheek, of the sword which I had long used honourably, if with little profit to myself; it needed the thought of all these things to restore me to courage and myself.

I judged at a later period that my companion was affected in somewhat the same way; for, as I stooped to press home the pegs which I had brought to tether the horses, he laid his hand on my arm. Glancing up to see what he wanted, I was struck by the wild look in his face (which the moonlight invested with a peculiar mottled pallor), and particularly in his eyes, which glittered like a madman's. He tried to speak, but seemed to find a difficulty in doing so; and I had to question him roughly before he found his tongue. When he did speak, it was only to implore me in an odd, excited manner to give up the expedition and return.

'What, now?' I said, surprised. 'Now we are here, Fresnoy?'

'Ay, give it up!' he cried, shaking me almost fiercely by the arm. 'Give it up, man! It will end badly, I tell you! In God's name, give it up, and go home before worse comes of it.'

'Whatever comes of it,' I answered coldly, shaking his grasp from my arm, and wondering much at this sudden fit of cowardice, 'I go on. You, M. Fresnoy, may do as you please!'

He started and drew back from me; but he did not reply, nor did he speak again. When I presently went off to fetch a ladder, of the position of which I had made a note during the afternoon, he accompanied me, and followed me back in the same dull silence to the walk below the balcony. I had looked more than once and eagerly at mademoiselle's window without any light or movement in that quarter rewarding my vigilance; but, undeterred by this, which might mean either that my plot was known, or that Mademoiselle de la Vire distrusted me, I set the ladder softly against the balcony, which was in deep shadow, and paused only to give Fresnoy his last instructions. These were simply to stand on guard at the foot of the ladder and defend it in case of surprise; so that, whatever happened inside the chateau, my retreat by the window might not be cut off.

Then I went cautiously up the ladder, and, with my sheathed sword in my left hand, stepped over the balustrade. Taking one pace forward, with fingers outstretched, I felt the leaded panes of the window and tapped softly.

As softly the casement gave way, and I followed it. A hand which I could see but not feel was laid on mine. All was darkness in the room, and before me, but the hand guided me two paces forward, then by a sudden pressure bade me stand. I heard the sound of a curtain being drawn behind me, and the next moment the cover of a rushlight was removed, and a feeble but sufficient light filled the chamber.

I comprehended that the drawing of that curtain over the window had cut off my retreat as effectually as if a door had been closed behind me. But distrust and suspicion gave way the next moment to the natural embarrassment of the man who finds himself in a false position and knows he can escape from it only by an awkward explanation.

The room in which I found myself was long, narrow, and low in the ceiling; and being hung with some dark stuff which swallowed up the light, terminated funereally at the farther end in the still deeper gloom of an alcove. Two or three huge chests, one bearing the remnants of a meal, stood against the walls. The middle of the floor was covered with a strip of coarse matting, on which a small table, a chair and foot-rest, and a couple of stools had place, with some smaller articles which lay scattered round a pair of half-filled saddle-bags. The slighter and smaller of the two figures I had seen stood beside the table, wearing a mask and riding cloak; and by her silent manner of gazing at me, as well as by a cold, disdainful bearing, which neither her mask nor cloak could hide, did more to chill and discomfit me than even my own knowledge that I had lost the pass-key which should have admitted me to her confidence.

The stouter figure of the afternoon turned out to be a red-cheeked, sturdy woman of thirty, with bright black eyes and a manner which lost nothing of its fierce impatience when she came a little later to address me. All my ideas of Fanchette were upset by the appearance of this woman, who, rustic in her speech and ways, seemed more like a duenna than the waiting-maid of a court beauty, and better fitted to guard a wayward damsel than to aid her in such an escapade as we had in hand.

She stood slightly behind her mistress, her coarse red hand resting on the back of the chair from which mademoiselle had apparently risen on my entrance. For a few seconds, which seemed minutes to me, we stood gazing at one another in silence, mademoiselle acknowledging my bow by a slight movement of the head. Then, seeing that they waited for me to speak, I did so.

'Mademoiselle de la Vire?' I murmured doubtfully.

She bent her head again; that was all.

I strove to speak with confidence. 'You will pardon me, mademoiselle,' I said, 'if I seem to be abrupt, but time is

everything. The horses are standing within a hundred yards of the house, and all the preparations for your flight are made. If we leave now, we can do so without opposition. The delay even of an hour may lead to discovery.'

For answer she laughed behind her mask—laughed coldly and ironically. 'You go too fast, sir,' she said, her low clear voice matching the laugh and rousing a feeling almost of anger in my heart. 'I do not know you; or, rather, I know nothing of you which should entitle you to interfere in my affairs. You are too quick to presume, sir. You say you come from a friend. From whom?'

'From one whom I am proud to call by that title,' I answered with what patience I might.

'His name!'

I answered firmly that I could not give it. And I eyed her steadily as I did so.

This for the moment seemed to baffle and confuse her, but after a pause she continued: 'Where do you propose to take me, sir?'

'To Blois; to the lodging of a friend of my friend.'

'You speak bravely,' she replied with a faint sneer. 'You have made some great friends lately it seems! But you bring me some letter, no doubt; at least some sign, some token, some warranty, that you are the person you pretend to be, M. de Marsac?'

'The truth is, mademoiselle,' I stammered, 'I must explain. I should tell you——'

'Nay, sir,' she cried impetuously, 'there is no need of telling. If you have what I say, show it me! It is you who lose time. Let us have no more words!'

I had used very few words, and, God knows, was not in the mind to use many; but, being in the wrong, I had no answer to make except the truth, and that humbly. 'I had such a token as you mention, mademoiselle,' I said, 'no farther back than this afternoon, in the shape of half a gold coin, entrusted to me by my friend. But, to my shame I say it, it was stolen from me a few hours back.'

'Stolen from you!' she exclaimed.

'Yes, mademoiselle; and for that reason I cannot show it,' I answered.

'You cannot show it? And you dare to come to me without it!' she cried, speaking with a vehemence which fairly startled me, prepared as I was for reproaches. 'You come to me! You!' she continued. And with that, scarcely stopping to take breath, she loaded me with abuse; calling me impertinent, a meddler, and a hundred other things, which I now blush to recall, and displaying in all a passion which even in her attendant would have surprised me, but in one so slight and seemingly delicate, overwhelmed and confounded me. In fault as I was, I could not understand the peculiar bitterness she displayed, or the contemptuous force of her language, and I stared at her in silent wonder until, of her own accord, she supplied the key to her feelings. In a fresh outburst of rage she snatched off her mask, and to my astonishment I saw before me the young maid of honour whom I had encountered in the King of Navarre's ante-chamber, and whom I had been so unfortunate as to expose to the raillery of Mathurine.

'Who has paid you, sir,' she continued, clenching her small hands and speaking with tears of anger in her eyes, 'to make me the laughing-stock of the Court? It was bad enough when I thought you the proper agent of those to whom I have a right to look for aid! It was bad enough when I thought myself forced, through their inconsiderate choice, to decide between an odious imprisonment and the ridicule to which your intervention must expose me! But that you should have dared, of your own notion, to follow me, you, the butt of the Court——'

'Mademoiselle!' I cried.

'A needy, out-at-elbows adventurer!' she persisted, triumphing in her cruelty. 'It exceeds all bearing! It is not to be suffered! It——'

'Nay, mademoiselle; you *shall* hear me!' I cried, with a sternness which at last stopped her. 'Granted I am poor,

I am still a gentleman; yes, mademoiselle,' I continued, firmly, 'a gentleman, and the last of a family which has spoken with yours on equal terms. And I claim to be heard. I swear that when I came here to-night I believed you to be a perfect stranger! I was unaware that I had ever seen you, unaware that I had ever met you before.'

'Then why did you come?' she said viciously.

'I was engaged to come by those whom you have mentioned, and there, and there only am I in fault. They entrusted to me a token which I have lost. For that I crave your pardon.'

'You have need to,' she answered bitterly, yet with a changed countenance, or I was mistaken, 'if your story be true, sir.'

'Ay, that you have!' the woman beside her echoed. 'Hoity toity, indeed! Here is a fuss about nothing. You call yourself a gentleman, and wear such a doublet as——'

'Peace, Fanchette!' mademoiselle said imperiously. And then for a moment she stood silent, eyeing me intently, her lips trembling with excitement and two red spots burning in her cheeks. It was clear from her dress and other things that she had made up her mind to fly had the token been forthcoming; and seeing this, and knowing how unwilling a young girl is to forego her own way, I still had some hopes that she might not persevere in her distrust and refusal. And so it turned out.

Her manner had changed to one of quiet scorn when she next spoke. 'You defend yourself skilfully, sir,' she said, drumming with her fingers on the table and eyeing me steadfastly. 'But can you give me any reason for the person you name making choice of such a messenger?'

'Yes,' I answered, boldly. 'That he may not be suspected of conniving at your escape.'

'Oh!' she cried, with a spark of her former passion. 'Then it is to be put about that Mademoiselle de la Vire had fled from Chizé with M. de Marsac, is it? I thought that!'

'Through the assistance of M. de Marsac,' I retorted, correcting her coldly. 'It is for you, mademoiselle,' I continued, 'to weigh that disadvantage against the unpleasantness of remaining here. It only remains for me to ask you to decide quickly. Time presses, and I have stayed here too long already.'

The words had barely passed my lips when they received unwelcome confirmation in the shape of a distant sound —the noisy closing of a door, which, clanging through the house at such an hour—I judged it to be after three o'clock —could scarcely mean anything but mischief. This noise was followed immediately, even while we stood listening with raised fingers, by other sounds—a muffled cry, and the tramp of heavy footsteps in a distant passage. Mademoiselle looked at me, and I at her woman. 'The door!' I muttered. 'Is it locked?'

'And bolted!' Fanchette answered; 'and a great chest set against it. Let them ramp; they will do no harm for a bit.'

'Then you have still time, mademoiselle,' I whispered, retreating a step and laying my hand on the curtain before the window. Perhaps I affected greater coolness than I felt. 'It is not too late. If you choose to remain, well and good. I cannot help it. If, on the other hand, you decide to trust yourself to me, I swear, on the honour of a gentleman, to be worthy of the trust—to serve you truly and protect you to the last! I can say no more.'

She trembled, looking from me to the door, on which some one had just begun to knock loudly. That seemed to decide her. Her lips apart, her eyes full of excitement, she turned hastily to Fanchette.

'Ay, go if you like,' the woman answered doggedly, reading the meaning of her look. 'There cannot be a greater villain than the one we know of. But once started, heaven help us, for if he overtakes us we'll pay dearly for it!'

The girl did not speak herself, but it was enough. The noise at the door increased each second, and began to

be mingled with angry appeals to Fanchette to open, and with threats in case she delayed. I cut the matter short by snatching up one of the saddle-bags—the other we left behind—and flung back the curtain which covered the window. At the same time the woman dashed out the light—a timely precaution—and throwing open the casement I stepped on to the balcony, the others following me closely.

The moon had risen high, and flooding with light the small open space about the house enabled me to see clearly all round the foot of the ladder. To my surprise Fresnoy was not at his post, nor was he to be seen anywhere; but as, at the moment I observed this, an outcry away to my left, at the rear of the chateau, came to my ears, and announced that the danger was no longer confined to the interior of the house, I concluded that he had gone that way to intercept the attack. Without more, therefore, I began to descend as quickly as I could, my sword under one arm and the bag under the other.

I was half-way down, and mademoiselle was already stepping on to the ladder to follow, when I heard footsteps below, and saw him run up, his sword in his hand.

'Quick, Fresnoy!' I cried. 'To the horses and unfasten them! Quick!'

I slid down the rest of the way, thinking he had gone to do my bidding. But my feet were scarcely on the ground when a tremendous blow in the side sent me staggering three paces from the ladder. The attack was so sudden, so unexpected, that but for the sight of Fresnoy's scowling face, wild with rage, at my shoulder, and the sound of his fierce breathing as he strove to release his sword, which had passed through my saddle-bag, I might never have known who struck the blow, or how narrow had been my escape.

Fortunately the knowledge did come to me in time, and before he freed his blade; and it nerved my hand. To draw my blade at such close quarters was impossible, but, dropping the bag which had saved my life, I dashed my hilt twice in his face with such violence that he fell back-

wards and lay on the turf, a dark stain growing and spreading on his upturned face.

It was scarcely done before the women reached the foot of the ladder and stood beside me. 'Quick!' I cried to them, 'or they will be upon us.' Seizing mademoiselle's hand, just as half-a-dozen men came running round the corner of the house, I jumped with her down the haha, and, urging her to her utmost speed, dashed across the open ground which lay between us and the belt of trees. Once in the shelter of the latter, where our movements were hidden from view, I had still to free the horses and mount mademoiselle and her woman, and this in haste. But my companions' admirable coolness and presence of mind, and the objection which our pursuers, who did not know our numbers, felt to leaving the open ground, enabled us to do all with comparative ease. I sprang on the Cid (it has always been my habit to teach my horse to stand for me, nor do I know any accomplishment more serviceable at a pinch), and giving Fresnoy's grey a cut over the flanks which despatched it ahead, led the way down the ride by which I had gained the chateau in the afternoon. I knew it to be level and clear of trees, and the fact that we chose it might throw our pursuers off the track for a time, by leading them to think we had taken the south road instead of that through the village.

CHAPTER V.

THE ROAD TO BLOIS.

We gained the road without let or hindrance, whence a sharp burst in the moonlight soon brought us to the village. Through this we swept on to the inn, almost running over the four evangelists, whom we found standing at the door ready for the saddle. I bade them, in a quick peremptory

tone, to get to horse, and was overjoyed to see them obey without demur or word of Fresnoy. In another minute, with a great clatter of hoofs, we sprang clear of the hamlet, and were well on the road to Melle, with Poitiers some thirteen leagues before us. I looked back, and thought I discerned lights moving in the direction of the chateau; but the dawn was still two hours off, and the moonlight left me in doubt whether these were real or the creatures of my own fearful fancy.

I remember, three years before this time, on the occasion of the famous retreat from Angers—when the Prince of Condé had involved his army beyond the Loire, and saw himself, in the impossibility of recrossing the river, compelled to take ship for England, leaving every one to shift for himself—I well remember on that occasion riding, alone and pistol in hand, through more than thirty miles of the enemy's country without drawing rein. But my anxieties were then confined to the four shoes of my horse. The dangers to which I was exposed at every ford and cross road were such as are inseparable from a campaign, and breed in generous hearts only a fierce pleasure, rarely to be otherwise enjoyed. And though I then rode warily, and where I could not carry terror, had all to fear myself, there was nothing secret or underhand in my business.

It was very different now. During the first few hours of our flight from Chizé I experienced a painful excitement, an alarm, a feverish anxiety to get forward, which was new to me; which oppressed my spirits to the very ground; which led me to take every sound borne to us on the wind for the sound of pursuit, transforming the clang of a hammer on the anvil into the ring of swords, and the voices of my own men into those of the pursuers. It was in vain mademoiselle rode with a free hand, and leaping such obstacles as lay in our way, gave promise of courage and endurance beyond my expectations. I could think of nothing but the three long days before us, with twenty-four hours to every day, and each hour fraught with a hundred chances of disaster and ruin.

In fact, the longer I considered our position—and as we pounded along, now splashing through a founderous hollow, now stumbling as we wound over a stony shoulder, I had ample time to reflect upon it—the greater seemed the difficulties before us. The loss of Fresnoy, while it freed me from some embarrassment, meant also the loss of a good sword, and we had mustered only too few before. The country which lay between us and the Loire, being the borderland between our party and the League, had been laid desolate so often as to be abandoned to pillage and disorder of every kind. The peasants had flocked into the towns. Their places had been taken by bands of robbers and deserters from both parties, who haunted the ruined villages about Poitiers, and preyed upon all who dared to pass. To add to our perils, the royal army under the Duke of Nevers was reported to be moving slowly southward, not very far to the left of our road; while a Huguenot expedition against Niort was also in progress within a few leagues of us.

With four staunch and trustworthy comrades at my back, I might have faced even this situation with a smile and a light heart; but the knowledge that my four knaves might mutiny at any moment, or, worse still, rid themselves of me and all restraint by a single treacherous blow such as Fresnoy had aimed at me, filled me with an ever-present dread; which it taxed my utmost energies to hide from them, and which I strove in vain to conceal from mademoiselle's keener vision.

Whether it was this had an effect upon her, giving her a meaner opinion of me than that which I had for a while hoped she entertained, or that she began, now it was too late, to regret her flight and resent my part in it, I scarcely know; but from daybreak onwards she assumed an attitude of cold suspicion towards me, which was only less unpleasant than the scornful distance of her manner when she deigned, which was seldom, to address me.

Not once did she allow me to forget that I was in her

eyes a needy adventurer, paid by her friends to escort her to a place of safety, but without any claim to the smallest privilege of intimacy or equality. When I would have adjusted her saddle, she bade her woman come and hold up her skirt, that my hands might not touch its hem even by accident. And when I would have brought wine to her at Melle, where we stayed for twenty minutes, she called Fanchette to hand it to her. She rode for the most part in her mask; and with her woman. One good effect only her pride and reserve had; they impressed our men with a strong sense of her importance, and the danger to which any interference with her might expose them.

The two men whom Fresnoy had enlisted I directed to ride a score of paces in advance. Luke and John I placed in the rear. In this manner I thought to keep them somewhat apart. For myself, I proposed to ride abreast of mademoiselle, but she made it so clear that my neighbourhood displeased her that I fell back, leaving her to ride with Fanchette; and contented myself with plodding at their heels, and striving to attach the later evangelists to my interests.

We were so fortunate, despite my fears, as to find the road nearly deserted—as, alas, was much of the country on either side—and to meet none but small parties travelling along it; who were glad enough, seeing the villainous looks of our outriders, to give us a wide berth, and be quit of us for the fright. We skirted Lusignan, shunning the streets, but passing near enough for me to point out to mademoiselle the site of the famous tower built, according to tradition, by the fairy Melusina, and rased thirteen years back by the Leaguers. She received my information so frigidly, however, that I offered no more, but fell back shrugging my shoulders, and rode in silence, until, some two hours after noon, the city of Poitiers came into sight, lying within its circle of walls and towers on a low hill in the middle of a country clothed in summer with rich vineyards, but now brown and bare and cheerless to the eye.

Fanchette turned and asked me abruptly if that were Poitiers.

I answered that it was, but added that for certain reasons I proposed not to halt, but to lie at a village a league beyond the city, where there was a tolerable inn.

'We shall do very well here,' the woman answered rudely. 'Any way, my lady will go no farther. She is tired and cold, and wet besides, and has gone far enough.'

'Still,' I answered, nettled by the woman's familiarity, 'I think mademoiselle will change her mind when she hears my reasons for going farther.'

'Mademoiselle does not wish to hear them, sir,' the lady replied herself, and very sharply.

'Nevertheless, I think you had better hear them,' I persisted, turning to her respectfully. 'You see, mademoiselle——'

'I see only one thing, sir,' she exclaimed, snatching off her mask and displaying a countenance beautiful indeed, but flushed for the moment with anger and impatience, 'that, whatever betides, I stay at Poitiers to-night.'

'If it would content you to rest an hour?' I suggested gently.

'It will not content me!' she rejoined with spirit. 'And let me tell you, sir,' she went on impetuously, 'once for all, that you take too much upon yourself. You are here to escort me, and to give orders to these ragamuffins, for they are nothing better, with whom you have thought fit to disgrace our company; but not to give orders to me or to control my movements. Confine yourself for the future, sir, to your duties, if you please.'

'I desire only to obey you,' I answered, suppressing the angry feelings which rose in my breast, and speaking as coolly as lay in my power. 'But, as the first of my duties is to provide for your safety, I am determined to omit nothing which can conduce to that end. You have not considered that, if a party in pursuit of us reaches Poitiers to-night, search will be made for us in the city, and we

shall be taken. If, on the other hand, we are known to have passed through, the hunt may go no farther; certainly will go no farther to-night. Therefore we must not, mademoiselle,' I added firmly, 'lie in Poitiers to-night.'

'Si ;' she exclaimed, looking at me, her face crimson with wonder and indignation, 'do you dare to——?'

'I dare do my duty, mademoiselle,' I answered, plucking up a spirit, though my heart was sore. 'I am a man old enough to be your father, and with little to lose, or I had not been here. I care nothing what you think or what you say of me, provided I can do what I have undertaken to do and place you safely in the hands of your friends. But enough, mademoiselle, we are at the gate. If you will permit me, I will ride through the streets beside you. We shall so attract less attention.'

Without waiting for a permission which she was very unlikely to give, I pushed my horse forward, and took my place beside her, signing to Fanchette to fall back. The maid obeyed, speechless with indignation; while mademoiselle flashed a scathing glance at me and looked round in helpless anger, as though it was in her mind to appeal against me even to the passers-by. But she thought better of it, and contenting herself with muttering the word 'Impertinent' put on her mask with fingers which trembled, I fancy, not a little.

A small rain was falling and the afternoon was well advanced when we entered the town, but I noticed that, notwithstanding this, the streets presented a busy and animated appearance, being full of knots of people engaged in earnest talk. A bell was tolling somewhere, and near the cathedral a crowd of no little size was standing, listening to a man who seemed to be reading a placard or manifesto attached to the wall. In another place a soldier, wearing the crimson colours of the League, but splashed and stained as with recent travel, was holding forth to a breathless circle who seemed to hang upon his lips. A neighbouring corner sheltered a handful of priests who whispered to-

gether with gloomy faces. Many stared at us as we passed, and some would have spoken; but I rode steadily on, inviting no converse. Nevertheless at the north gate I got a rare fright; for, though it wanted a full half-hour of sunset, the porter was in the act of closing it. Seeing us, he waited grumbling until we came up, and then muttered, in answer to my remonstrance, something about queer times and wilful people having their way. I took little notice of what he said, however, being anxious only to get through the gate and leave as few traces of our passage as might be.

As soon as we were outside the town I fell back, permitting Fanchette to take my place. For another league, a long and dreary one, we plodded on in silence, horses and men alike jaded and sullen, and the women scarcely able to keep their saddles for fatigue. At last, much to my relief, seeing that I began to fear I had taxed mademoiselle's strength too far, the long low buildings of the inn at which I proposed to stay came in sight, at the crossing of the road and river. The place looked blank and cheerless, for the dusk was thickening; but as we trailed one by one into the courtyard a stream of firelight burst on us from doors and windows, and a dozen sounds of life and comfort greeted our ears.

Noticing that mademoiselle was benumbed and cramped with long sitting, I would have helped her to dismount; but she fiercely rejected my aid, and I had to content myself with requesting the landlord to assign the best accommodation he had to the lady and her attendant, and secure as much privacy for them as possible. The man assented very civilly and said all should be done; but I noticed that his eyes wandered while I talked, and that he seemed to have something on his mind. When he returned, after disposing of them, it came out.

'Did you ever happen to see him, sir?' he asked with a sigh; yet was there a smug air of pleasure mingled with his melancholy.

'See whom?' I answered, staring at him, for neither of us had mentioned any one.

'The Duke, sir.'

I stared again between wonder and suspicion. 'The Duke of Nevers is not in this part, is he?' I said slowly. 'I heard he was on the Brittany border, away to the westward.'

'Mon Dieu!' my host exclaimed, raising his hands in astonishment. 'You have not heard, sir?'

'I have heard nothing,' I answered impatiently.

'You have not heard, sir, that the most puissant and illustrious lord the Duke of Guise is dead?'

'M. de Guise dead? It is not true!' I cried astonished.

He nodded, however, several times with an air of great importance, and seemed as if he would have gone on to give me some particulars. But, remembering, as I fancied, that he spoke in the hearing of half-a-dozen guests who sat about the great fire behind me, and had both eyes and ears open, he contented himself with shifting his towel to his other arm and adding only, 'Yes, sir, dead as any nail. The news came through here yesterday, and made a pretty stir. It happened at Blois the day but one before Christmas, if all be true.'

I was thunderstruck. This was news which might change the face of France. 'How did it happen?' I asked.

My host covered his mouth with his hand and coughed, and, privily twitching my sleeve, gave me to understand with some shamefacedness that he could not say more in public. I was about to make some excuse to retire with him, when a harsh voice, addressed apparently to me, caused me to turn sharply. I found at my elbow a tall thin-faced monk in the habit of the Jacobin order. He had risen from his seat beside the fire, and seemed to be labouring under great excitement.

'Who asked how it happened?' he cried, rolling his eyes in a kind of frenzy, while still observant, or I was much mistaken, of his listeners. Is there a man in France to whom the tale has not been told? Is there?'

'I will answer for one,' I replied, regarding him with little favour. 'I have heard nothing.'

'Then you shall! Listen!' he exclaimed, raising his right hand and brandishing it as though he denounced a person then present. 'Hear my accusation, made in the name of Mother Church and the saints against the arch hypocrite, the perjurer and assassin sitting in high places! He shall be Anathema Maranatha, for he has shed the blood of the holy and the pure, the chosen of Heaven! He shall go down to the pit, and that soon. The blood that he has shed shall be required of him, and that before he is one year older.'

'Tut-tut. All that sounds very fine, good father,' I said, waxing impatient, and a little scornful; for I saw that he was one of those wandering and often crazy monks in whom the League found their most useful emissaries. 'But I should profit more by your gentle words, if I knew whom you were cursing.'

'The man of blood!' he cried; 'through whom the last but not the least of God's saints and martyrs entered into glory on the Friday before Christmas.'

Moved by such profanity, and judging him, notwithstanding the extravagance of his words and gestures, to be less mad than he seemed, and at least as much knave as fool, I bade him sternly have done with his cursing, and proceed to his story if he had one.

He glowered at me for a moment, as though he were minded to launch his spiritual weapons at my head; but as I returned his glare with an unmoved eye—and my four rascals, who were as impatient as myself to learn the news, and had scarce more reverence for a shaven crown, began to murmur—he thought better of it, and cooling as suddenly as he had flamed up, lost no more time in satisfying our curiosity.

It would ill become me, however, to set down the extravagant and often blasphemous harangue in which, styling M. de Guise the martyr of God, he told the story now so familiar—the story of that dark wintry morning at Blois,

when the king's messenger, knocking early at the duke's door, bade him hurry, for the king wanted him. The story is trite enough now. When I heard it first in the inn on the Clain, it was all new and all marvellous.

The monk, too, telling the story as if he had seen the events with his own eyes, omitted nothing which might impress his hearers. He told us how the duke received warning after warning, and answered in the very antechamber, 'He dare not!' How his blood, mysteriously advised of coming dissolution, grew chill, and his eye, wounded at Chateau Thierry, began to run, so that he had to send for the handkerchief he had forgotten to bring. He told us, even, how the duke drew his assassins up and down the chamber, how he cried for mercy, and how he died at last at the foot of the king's bed, and how the king, who had never dared to face him living, came and spurned him dead!

There were pale faces round the fire when he ceased, and bent brows and lips hard pressed together. When he stood and cursed the King of France—cursing him openly by the name of Henry of Valois, a thing I had never looked to hear in France—though no one said 'Amen,' and all glanced over their shoulders, and our host pattered from the room as if he had seen a ghost, it seemed to be no man's duty to gainsay him.

For myself, I was full of thoughts which it would have been unsafe to utter in that company or so near the Loire. I looked back sixteen years. Who but Henry of Guise had spurned the corpse of Coligny? And who but Henry of Valois had backed him in the act? Who but Henry of Guise had drenched Paris with blood, and who but Henry of Valois had ridden by his side? One 23rd of the month —a day never to be erased from France's annals—had purchased for him a term of greatness. A second 23rd saw him pay the price—saw his ashes cast secretly and by night no man knows where!

Moved by such thoughts, and observing that the priest was going the round of the company collecting money for

masses for the duke's soul, to which object I could neither give with a good conscience nor refuse without exciting suspicion, I slipped out; and finding a man of decent appearance talking with the landlord in a small room beside the kitchen, I called for a flask of the best wine, and by means of that introduction obtained my supper in their company.

The stranger was a Norman horsedealer, returning home after disposing of his string. He seemed to be in a large way of business, and being of a bluff, independent spirit, as many of those Norman townsmen are, was inclined at first to treat me with more familiarity than respect; the fact of my nag, for which he would have chaffered, excelling my coat in quality, leading him to set me down as a steward or intendant. The pursuit of his trade, however, had brought him into connection with all classes of men, and he quickly perceived his mistake; and as he knew the provinces between the Seine and Loire to perfection, and made it part of his business to foresee the chances of peace and war, I obtained a great amount of information from him, and indeed conceived no little liking for him. He believed that the assassination of M. de Guise would alienate so much of France from the king that his majesty would have little left save the towns on the Loire, and some other places lying within easy reach of his court at Blois.

'But,' I said, 'things seem quiet now. Here, for instance.'

'It is the calm before the storm,' he answered. 'There is a monk in there. Have you heard him?'

I nodded.

'He is only one among a hundred—a thousand,' the horsedealer continued, looking at me and nodding with meaning. He was a brown-haired man with shrewd grey eyes, such as many Normans have. 'They will get their way too, you will see,' he went on. 'Well, horses will go up, so I have no cause to grumble; but, if I were on my way to Blois with women or gear of that kind, I should

not choose this time for picking posies on the road. I should see the inside of the gates as soon as possible.'

I thought there was much in what he said; and when he went on to maintain that the king would find himself between the hammer and the anvil—between the League holding all the north and the Huguenots holding all the south—and must needs in time come to terms with the latter, seeing that the former would rest content with nothing short of his deposition, I began to agree with him that we should shortly see great changes and very stirring times.

'Still if they depose the king,' I said, 'the King of Navarre must succeed him. He is the heir of France.'

'Bah!' my companion replied somewhat contemptuously. 'The League will see to that. He goes with the other.'

'Then the kings are in one cry, and you are right,' I said with conviction. 'They must unite.'

'So they will. It is only a question of time,' he said.

In the morning, having only one man with him, and, as I guessed, a considerable sum of money, he volunteered to join our party as far as Blois. I assented gladly, and he did so, this addition to our numbers ridding me at once of the greater part of my fears. I did not expect any opposition on the part of mademoiselle, who would gain in consequence as well as in safety. Nor did she offer any. She was content, I think, to welcome any addition to our party which would save her from the necessity of riding in the company of my old cloak.

CHAPTER VI.

MY MOTHER'S LODGING.

Travelling by way of Chatelhérault and Tours, we reached the neighbourhood of Blois a little after noon on the third day without misadventure or any intimation of

pursuit. The Norman proved himself a cheerful companion on the road, as I already knew him to be a man of sense and shrewdness; while his presence rendered the task of keeping my men in order an easy one. I began to consider the adventure as practically achieved; and regarding Mademoiselle de la Vire as already in effect transferred to the care of M. de Rosny, I ventured to turn my thoughts to the development of my own plans and the choice of a haven in which I might rest secure from the vengeance of M. de Turenne.

For the moment I had evaded his pursuit, and, assisted by the confusion caused everywhere by the death of Guise, had succeeded in thwarting his plans and affronting his authority with seeming ease. But I knew too much of his power and had heard too many instances of his fierce temper and resolute will to presume on short impunity or to expect the future with anything but diffidence and dismay.

The exclamations of my companions on coming within sight of Blois aroused me from these reflections. I joined them, and fully shared their emotion as I gazed on the stately towers which had witnessed so many royal festivities, and, alas! one royal tragedy; which had sheltered Louis the Well-beloved and Francis the Great, and rung with the laughter of Diana of Poitiers and the second Henry. The play of fancy wreathed the sombre building with a hundred memories grave and gay. But, though the rich plain of the Loire still swelled upward as of old in gentle homage at the feet of the gallant town, the shadow of crime seemed to darken all, and dim even the glories of the royal standard which hung idly in the air.

We had heard so many reports of the fear and suspicion which reigned in the city and of the strict supervision which was exercised over all who entered—the king dreading a repetition of the day of the Barricades—that we halted at a little inn a mile short of the gate and broke up our company. I parted from my Norman friend with mutual ex-

pressions of esteem, and from my own men, whom I had paid off in the morning, complimenting each of them with a handsome present, with a feeling of relief equally sincere. I hoped—but the hope was not fated to be gratified—that I might never see the knaves again.

It wanted less than an hour of sunset when I rode up to the gate, a few paces in front of mademoiselle and her woman; as if I had really been the intendant for whom the horse-dealer had mistaken me. We found the guardhouse lined with soldiers, who scanned us very narrowly as we approached, and whose stern features and ordered weapons showed that they were not there for mere effect. The fact, however, that we came from Tours, a city still in the king's hands, served to allay suspicion, and we passed without accident.

Once in the streets, and riding in single file between the houses, to the windows of which the townsfolk seemed to be attracted by the slightest commotion, so full of terror was the air, I experienced a moment of huge relief. This was Blois—Blois at last. We were within a few score yards of the Bleeding Heart. In a few minutes I should receive a quittance, and be free to think only of myself. Nor was my pleasure much lessened by the fact that I was so soon to part from Mademoiselle de la Vire. Frankly, I was far from liking her. Exposure to the air of a court had spoiled, it seemed to me, whatever graces of disposition the young lady had ever possessed. She still maintained, and had maintained throughout the journey, the cold and suspicious attitude assumed at starting; nor had she ever expressed the least solicitude on my behalf, or the slightest sense that we were incurring danger in her service. She had not scrupled constantly to prefer her whims to the common advantage, and even safety; while her sense of self-importance had come to be so great, that she seemed to hold herself exempt from the duty of thanking any human creature. I could not deny that she was beautiful—indeed, I often thought, when watching her, of the day

when I had seen her in the King of Navarre's antechamber in all the glory of her charms. But I felt none the less that I could turn my back on her—leaving her in safety—without regret; and be thankful that her path would never again cross mine.

With such thoughts in my breast I turned the corner of the Rue de St. Denys and came at once upon the Bleeding Heart, a small but decent-looking hostelry situate near the end of the street and opposite a church. A bluff, grey-haired man, who was standing in the doorway, came forward as we halted, and looking curiously at mademoiselle asked what I lacked; adding civilly that the house was full and they had no sleeping room, the late events having drawn a great assemblage to Blois.

'I want only an address,' I answered, leaning from the saddle and speaking in a low voice that I might not be overheard by the passers-by. 'The Baron de Rosny is in Blois, is he not?'

The man started at the name of the Huguenot leader, and looked round him nervously. But, seeing that no one was very near us, he answered: 'He was, sir; but he left town a week ago and more. There have been strange doings here, and M. de Rosny thought that the climate suited him ill.'

He said this with so much meaning, as well as concern that he should not be overheard, that, though I was taken aback and bitterly disappointed, I succeeded in restraining all exclamations and even show of feeling. After a pause of dismay, I asked whither M. de Rosny had gone.

'To Rosny,' was the answer.

'And Rosny?'

'Is beyond Chartres, pretty well all the way to Mantes,' the man answered, stroking my horse's neck. 'Say thirty leagues.'

I turned my horse, and hurriedly communicated what he said to mademoiselle, who was waiting a few paces away. Unwelcome to me, the news was still less welcome to her.

Her chagrin and indignation knew no bounds. For a moment words failed her, but her flashing eyes said more than her tongue as she cried to me: 'Well, sir, and what now? Is this the end of your fine promises? Where is your Rosny, if all be not a lying invention of your own?'

Feeling that she had some excuse I suppressed my choler, and humbly repeating that Rosny was at his house, two days farther on, and that I could see nothing for it but to go to him, I asked the landlord where we could find a lodging for the night.

'Indeed, sir, that is more than I can say,' he answered, looking curiously at us, and thinking, I doubt not, that with my shabby cloak and fine horse, and mademoiselle's mask and spattered riding-coat, we were an odd couple. 'There is not an inn which is not full to the garrets—nay, and the stables; and, what is more, people are chary of taking strangers in. These are strange times. They say,' he continued in a lower tone, 'that the old queen is dying up there, and will not last the night.'

I nodded. 'We must go somewhere,' I said.

'I would help you if I could,' he answered, shrugging his shoulders. 'But there it is! Blois is full from the tiles to the cellars.'

My horse shivered under me, and mademoiselle, whose patience was gone, cried harshly to me to do something. 'We cannot spend the night in the streets,' she said fiercely.

I saw that she was worn out and scarcely mistress of herself. The light was falling, and with it some rain. The reek of the kennels and the close air from the houses seemed to stifle us. The bell at the church behind us was jangling out vespers. A few people, attracted by the sight of our horses standing before the inn, had gathered round and were watching us.

Something I saw must be done, and done quickly. In despair, and seeing no other resort, I broached a proposal of which I had not hitherto even dreamed. 'Mademoiselle,' I said bluntly, 'I must take you to my mother's.'

'To your mother's, sir?' she cried, rousing herself. Her voice rang with haughty surprise.

'Yes,' I replied brusquely; 'since, as you say, we cannot spend the night in the streets, and I do not know where else I can dispose of you. From the last advices I had I believe her to have followed the court hither. My friend,' I continued, turning to the landlord, 'do you know by name a Madame de Bonne, who should be in Blois?'

'A Madame de Bonne?' he muttered, reflecting. 'I have heard the name lately. Wait a moment.' Disappearing into the house, he returned almost immediately, followed by a lanky pale-faced youth wearing a tattered black soutane. 'Yes,' he said nodding, 'there is a worthy lady of that name lodging in the next street, I am told. As it happens, this young man lives in the same house, and will guide you, if you like.'

I assented, and, thanking him for his information, turned my horse and requested the youth to lead the way. We had scarcely passed the corner of the street, however, and entered one somewhat more narrow and less frequented, when mademoiselle, who was riding behind me, stopped and called to me. I drew rein, and, turning, asked what it was.

'I am not coming,' she said, her voice trembling slightly, but whether with alarm or anger I could not determine. 'I know nothing of you, and I—I demand to be taken to M. de Rosny.'

'If you cry that name aloud in the streets of Blois, mademoiselle,' I retorted, 'you are like enough to be taken whither you will not care to go! As for M. de Rosny, I have told you that he is not here. He has gone to his seat at Mantes.'

'Then take me to him!'

'At this hour of the night?' I said drily. 'It is two days' journey from here.'

'Then I will go to an inn,' she replied sullenly.

'You have heard that there is no room in the inns,' I rejoined with what patience I could. 'And to go from inn to

inn at this hour might lead us into trouble. I can assure you that I am as much taken aback by M. de Rosny's absence as you are. For the present, we are close to my mother's lodging, and——'

'I know nothing of your mother!' she exclaimed passionately, her voice raised. 'You have enticed me hither by false pretences, sir, and I will endure it no longer. I will——'

'What you will do, I do not know then, mademoiselle,' I replied, quite at my wits' end; for what with the rain and the darkness, the unknown streets—in which our tarrying might at any moment collect a crowd—and this stubborn girl's opposition, I knew not whither to turn. 'For my part I can suggest nothing else. It does not become me to speak of my mother,' I continued, 'or I might say that even Mademoiselle de la Vire need not be ashamed to accept the hospitality of Madame de Bonne. Nor are my mother's circumstances,' I added proudly, 'though narrow, so mean as to deprive her of the privileges of her birth.'

My last words appeared to make some impression upon my companion. She turned and spoke to her woman, who replied in a low voice, tossing her head the while and glaring at me in speechless indignation. Had there been anything else for it, they would doubtless have flouted my offer still; but apparently Fanchette could suggest nothing, and presently mademoiselle, with a sullen air, bade me lead on.

Taking this for permission, the lanky youth in the black soutane, who had remained at my bridle throughout the discussion, now listening and now staring, nodded and resumed his way; and I followed. After proceeding a little more than fifty yards he stopped before a mean-looking doorway, flanked by grated windows, and fronted by a lofty wall which I took to be the back of some nobleman's garden. The street at this point was unlighted, and little better than an alley; nor was the appearance of the house, which was narrow and ill-looking, though lofty, calculated, as far as I could make it out in the darkness, to allay mademoi-

selle's suspicions. Knowing, however, that people of position are often obliged in towns to lodge in poor houses, I thought nothing of this, and only strove to get mademoiselle dismounted as quickly as possible. The lad groped about and found two rings beside the door, and to these I tied up the horses. Then, bidding him lead the way, and begging mademoiselle to follow, I plunged into the darkness of the passage and felt my way to the foot of the staircase, which was entirely unlighted, and smelled close and unpleasant.

'Which floor?' I asked my guide.

'The fourth,' he answered quietly.

'Morbleu!' I muttered, as I began to ascend, my hand on the wall. 'What is the meaning of this?'

For I was perplexed. The revenues of Marsac, though small, should have kept my mother, whom I had last seen in Paris before the Nemours edict, in tolerable comfort—such modest comfort, at any rate, as could scarcely be looked for in such a house as this—obscure, ill-tended, unlighted. To my perplexity was added, before I reached the top of the stairs, disquietude—disquietude on her account as well as on mademoiselle's. I felt that something was wrong, and would have given much to recall the invitation I had pressed on the latter.

What the young lady thought herself I could pretty well guess, as I listened to her hurried breathing at my shoulder. With every step I expected her to refuse to go farther. But, having once made up her mind, she followed me stubbornly, though the darkness was such that involuntarily I loosened my dagger, and prepared to defend myself should this turn out to be a trap.

We reached the top, however, without accident. Our guide knocked softly at a door and immediately opened it without waiting for an answer. A feeble light shone out on the stair-head, and bending my head, for the lintel was low, I stepped into the room.

I advanced two paces and stood looking about me in angry bewilderment. The bareness of extreme poverty

marked everything on which my eyes rested. A cracked earthenware lamp smoked and sputtered on a stool in the middle of the rotting floor. An old black cloak nailed to the wall, and flapping to and fro in the draught like some dead gallowsbird, hung in front of the unglazed window. A jar in a corner caught the drippings from a hole in the roof. An iron pot and a second stool—the latter casting a long shadow across the floor—stood beside the handful of wood ashes, which smouldered on the hearth. And that was all the furniture I saw, except a bed which filled the farther end of the long narrow room, and was curtained off so as to form a kind of miserable alcove.

A glance sufficed to show me all this, and that the room was empty, or apparently empty. Yet I looked again and again, stupefied. At last finding my voice, I turned to the young man who had brought us hither, and with a fierce oath demanded of him what he meant.

He shrank back behind the open door, and yet answered with a kind of sullen surprise that I had asked for Madame de Bonne's, and this was it.

'Madame de Bonne's!' I muttered. 'This Madame de Bonne's!'

He nodded.

'Of course it is! And you know it!' mademoiselle hissed in my ear, her voice, as she interposed, hoarse with passion. 'Don't think that you can deceive us any longer. We know all! This,' she continued, looking round, her cheeks scarlet, her eyes ablaze with scorn, 'is your mother's, is it! Your mother who has followed the court hither—whose means are narrow, but not so small as to deprive her of the privileges of her rank! This is your mother's hospitality, is it? You are a cheat, sir! and a detected cheat! Let us begone! Let me go, sir, I say!'

Twice I had tried to stop the current of her words; but in vain. Now with anger which surpassed hers a hundredfold—for who, being a man, would hear himself misnamed before his mother?—I succeeded. 'Silence, mademoiselle!'

I cried, my grasp on her wrist. 'Silence, I say! This *is* my mother!'

And running forward to the bed, I fell on my knees beside it. A feeble hand had half withdrawn the curtain, and through the gap my mother's stricken face looked out, a great fear stamped upon it.

CHAPTER VII.

SIMON FLEIX.

For some minutes I forgot mademoiselle in paying those assiduous attentions to my mother which her state and my duty demanded; and which I offered the more anxiously that I recognised, with a sinking heart, the changes which age and illness had made in her since my last visit. The shock of mademoiselle's words had thrown her into a syncope, from which she did not recover for some time; and then rather through the assistance of our strange guide, who seemed well aware what to do, than through my efforts. Anxious as I was to learn what had reduced her to such straits and such a place, this was not the time to satisfy my curiosity, and I prepared myself instead for the task of effacing the painful impression which mademoiselle's words had made on her mind.

On first coming to herself she did not remember them, but, content to find me by her side—for there is something so alchemic in a mother's love that I doubt not my presence changed her garret to a palace—she spent herself in feeble caresses and broken words. Presently, however, her eye falling on mademoiselle and her maid, who remained standing by the hearth, looking darkly at us from time to time, she recalled, first the shock which had prostrated her, and then its cause, and raising herself on her elbow, looked about her wildly. 'Gaston!' she cried, clutching my hand with

her thin fingers, 'what was it I heard? It was of you someone spoke—a woman! She called you—or did I dream it?—a cheat! You!'

'Madame, madame,' I said, striving to speak carelessly, though the sight of her grey hair, straggling and dishevelled, moved me strangely, 'was it likely? Would anyone dare to use such expressions of me in your presence? You must indeed have dreamed it!'

The words, however, returning more and more vividly to her mind, she looked at me very pitifully, and in great agitation laid her arm on my neck, as though she would shelter me with the puny strength which just enabled her to rise in bed. 'But someone,' she muttered, her eyes on the strangers, 'said it, Gaston? I heard it. What did it mean?'

'What you heard, madame,' I answered, with an attempt at gaiety, though the tears stood in my eyes, 'was, doubtless, mademoiselle here scolding our guide from Tours, who demanded three times the proper *pourboire*. The impudent rascal deserved all that was said to him, I assure you.'

'Was that it?' she murmured doubtfully.

'That must have been what you heard, madame,' I answered, as if I felt no doubt.

She fell back with a sigh of relief, and a little colour came into her wan face. But her eyes still dwelt curiously, and with apprehension, on mademoiselle, who stood looking sullenly into the fire; and seeing this my heart misgave me sorely that I had done a foolish thing in bringing the girl there. I foresaw a hundred questions which would be asked, and a hundred complications which must ensue, and felt already the blush of shame mounting to my cheek.

'Who is that?' my mother asked softly. 'I am ill. She must excuse me.' She pointed with her fragile finger to my companions.

I rose, and still keeping her hand in mine, turned so as to face the hearth. 'This, madame,' I answered formally,

'is Mademoiselle ——, but her name I will commit to you later, and in private. Suffice it to say that she is a lady of rank, who has been committed to my charge by a high personage.'

'A high personage?' my mother repeated gently, glancing at me with a smile of gratification.

'One of the highest,' I said. 'Such a charge being a great honour to me, I felt that I could not better execute it, madame, since we must lie in Blois one night, than by requesting your hospitality on her behalf.'

I dared mademoiselle as I spoke—I dared her with my eye to contradict or interrupt me. For answer, she looked at me once, inclining her head a little, and gazing at us from under her long eyelashes. Then she turned back to the fire, and her foot resumed its angry tapping on the floor.

'I regret that I cannot receive her better,' my mother answered feebly. 'I have had losses of late. I—but I will speak of that at another time. Mademoiselle doubtless knows,' she continued with dignity, 'you and your position in the South too well to think ill of the momentary straits to which she finds me reduced.'

I saw mademoiselle start, and I writhed under the glance of covert scorn, of amazed indignation, which she shot at me. But my mother gently patting my hand, I answered patiently, 'Mademoiselle will think only what is kind, madame—of that I am assured. And lodgings are scarce to-night in Blois.'

'But tell me of yourself, Gaston,' my mother cried eagerly; and I had not the heart, with her touch on my hand, her eyes on my face, to tear myself away, much as I dreaded what was coming, and longed to end the scene. 'Tell me of yourself. You are still in favour with the king of —— I will not name him here?'

'Still, madame,' I answered, looking steadily at mademoiselle, though my face burned.

'You are still—he consults you, Gaston?"

'Still, madame.'

My mother heaved a happy sigh, and sank lower in the bed. 'And your employments?' she murmured, her voice trembling with gratification. 'They have not been reduced? You still retain them, Gaston?"

'Still, madame,' I answered, the perspiration standing on my brow, my shame almost more than I could bear.

'Twelve thousand livres a year, I think?'

'The same, madame.'

'And your establishment? How many do you keep now? Your valet, of course? And lackeys—how many at present?' She glanced, with an eye of pride, while she waited for my answer, first at the two silent figures by the fire, then at the poverty-stricken room; as if the sight of its bareness heightened for her the joy of my prosperity.

She had no suspicion of my trouble, my misery, or that the last question almost filled the cup too full. Hitherto all had been easy, but this seemed to choke me. I stammered and lost my voice. Mademoiselle, her head bowed, was gazing into the fire. Fanchette was staring at me, her black eyes round as saucers, her mouth half-open. 'Well, madame,' I muttered at length, 'to tell you the truth, at present, you must understand, I have been forced to——'

'What, Gaston?' Madame de Bonne half rose in bed. Her voice was sharp with disappointment and apprehension; the grasp of her fingers on my hand grew closer.

I could not resist that appeal. I flung away the last rag of shame. 'To reduce my establishment somewhat,' I answered, looking a miserable defiance at mademoiselle's averted figure. She had called me a liar and a cheat—here in the room! I must stand before her a liar and a cheat confessed. 'I keep but three lackeys now, madame.'

'Still it is creditable,' my mother muttered thoughtfully, her eyes shining. 'Your dress, however, Gaston—only my eyes are weak—seems to me——'

'Tut, tut! It is but a disguise,' I answered quickly.

'I might have known that,' she rejoined, sinking back with a smile and a sigh of content. 'But when I first saw

you I was almost afraid that something had happened to you. And I have been uneasy lately,' she went on, releasing my hand, and beginning to play with the coverlet, as though the remembrance troubled her. 'There was a man here a while ago—a friend of Simon Fleix there—who had been south to Pau and Nerac, and he said there was no M. de Marsac about the Court.'

'He probably knew less of the Court than the wine-tavern,' I answered with a ghastly smile.

'That was just what I told him,' my mother responded quickly and eagerly. 'I warrant you I sent him away ill-satisfied.'

'Of course,' I said; 'there will always be people of that kind. But now, if you will permit me, madame, I will make such arrangements for mademoiselle as are necessary.'

Begging her accordingly to lie down and compose herself—for even so short a conversation, following on the excitement of our arrival, had exhausted her to a painful degree—I took the youth, who had just returned from stabling our horses, a little aside, and learning that he lodged in a smaller chamber on the farther side of the landing, secured it for the use of mademoiselle and her woman. In spite of a certain excitability which marked him at times, he seemed to be a quick, ready fellow, and he willingly undertook to go out, late as it was, and procure some provisions and a few other things which were sadly needed, as well for my mother's comfort as for our own. I directed Fanchette to aid him in the preparation of the other chamber, and thus for a while I was left alone with mademoiselle. She had taken one of the stools, and sat cowering over the fire, the hood of her cloak drawn about her head; in such a manner that even when she looked at me, which she did from time to time, I saw little more than her eyes, bright with contemptuous anger.

'So, sir,' she presently began, speaking in a low voice, and turning slightly towards me, 'you practise lying even here?'

I felt so strongly the futility of denial or explanation that I shrugged my shoulders and remained silent under the sneer. Two more days—two more days would take us to Rosny, and my task would be done, and mademoiselle and I would part for good and all. What would it matter then what she thought of me? What did it matter now?

For the first time in our intercourse my silence seemed to disconcert and displease her. 'Have you nothing to say for yourself?' she muttered sharply, crushing a fragment of charcoal under her foot, and stooping to peer at the ashes. 'Have you not another lie in your quiver, M. de Marsac? De Marsac!' And she repeated the title, with a scornful laugh, as if she put no faith in my claim to it.

But I would answer nothing—nothing; and we remained silent until Fanchette, coming in to say that the chamber was ready, held the light for her mistress to pass out. I told the woman to come back and fetch mademoiselle's supper, and then, being left alone with my mother, who had fallen asleep, with a smile on her thin, worn face, I began to wonder what had happened to reduce her to such dire poverty.

I feared to agitate her by referring to it; but later in the evening, when her curtains were drawn and Simon Fleix and I were left together, eyeing one another across the embers like dogs of different breeds—with a certain strangeness and suspicion—my thoughts recurred to the question; and determining first to learn something about my companion, whose pale, eager face and tattered, black dress gave him a certain individuality, I asked him whether he had come from Paris with Madame de Bonne.

He nodded without speaking.

I asked him if he had known her long.

'Twelve months,' he answered. 'I lodged on the fifth, madame on the second, floor of the same house in Paris.'

I leaned forward and plucked the hem of his black robe. 'What is this?' I said, with a little contempt. 'You are not a priest, man.'

'No,' he answered, fingering the stuff himself, and gazing at me in a curious, vacant fashion. 'I am a student of the Sorbonne.'

I drew off from him with a muttered oath, wondering—while I looked at him with suspicious eyes—how he came to be here, and particularly how he came to be in attendance on my mother, who had been educated from childhood in the Religion, and had professed it in private all her life. I could think of no one who, in old days, would have been less welcome in her house than a Sorbonnist, and began to fancy that here should lie the secret of her miserable condition.

'You don't like the Sorbonne?' he said, reading my thoughts; which were, indeed, plain enough.

'No more than I love the devil!' I said bluntly.

He leaned forward and, stretching out a thin, nervous hand, laid it on my knee. 'What if they are right, though?' he muttered, his voice hoarse. 'What if they are right, M. de Marsac?'

'Who right?' I asked roughly, drawing back afresh.

'The Sorbonne,' he repeated, his face red with excitement, his eyes peering uncannily into mine. 'Don't you see,' he continued, pinching my knee in his earnestness, and thrusting his face nearer and nearer to mine, 'it all turns on that? It all turns on that—salvation or damnation! Are they right? Are you right? You say yes to this, no to that, you white-coats; and you say it lightly, but are you right? Are you right? Mon Dieu!' he continued, drawing back abruptly and clawing the air with impatience, 'I have read, read, read! I have listened to sermons, theses, disputations, and I know nothing. I know no more than when I began.'

He sprang up and began to pace the floor, while I gazed at him with a feeling of pity. A very learned person once told me that the troubles of these times bred four kinds of men, who were much to be compassionated: fanatics on the one side or the other, who lost sight of all else in the

intensity of their faith; men who, like Simon Fleix, sought desperately after something to believe, and found it not; and lastly, scoffers, who, believing in nothing, looked on all religion as a mockery.

He presently stopped walking—in his utmost excitement I remarked that he never forgot my mother, but trod more lightly when he drew near the alcove—and spoke again.

'You are a Huguenot?' he said.

'Yes,' I replied.

'So is she,' he rejoined, pointing towards the bed. 'But do you feel no doubts?'

'None,' I said quietly.

'Nor does she,' he answered again, stopping opposite me. You made up your mind—how?'

'I was born in the Religion,' I said.

'And you have never questioned it?'

'Never.'

'Nor thought much about it?'

'Not a great deal,' I answered.

'Saint Gris!' he exclaimed in a low tone. 'And do you never think of hell-fire—of the worm which dieth not, and the fire which shall not be quenched? Do you never think of that, M. de Marsac?'

'No, my friend, never!' I answered, rising impatiently; for at that hour, and in that silent, gloomy room I found his conversation dispiriting. 'I believe what I was taught to believe, and I strive to hurt no one but the enemy. I think little; and if I were you I would think less. I would do something, man—fight, play, work, anything but think! Leave that to clerks.'

'I am a clerk,' he answered.

'A poor one, it seems,' I retorted, with a little scorn in my tone. 'Leave it, man. Work! Fight! Do something!'

'Fight?' he said, as if the idea were a novel one. 'Fight? But there, I might be killed; and then hell-fire, you see!'

'Zounds, man!' I cried, out of patience with a folly which, to tell the truth, the lamp burning low, and the rain pattering on the roof, made the skin of my back feel cold and creepy. 'Enough of this! Keep your doubts and your fire to yourself! And answer me,' I continued, sternly. 'How came Madame de Bonne so poor? How did she come down to this place?'

He sat down on his stool, the excitement dying quickly out of his face. 'She gave away all her money,' he said slowly and reluctantly. It may be imagined that this answer surprised me. 'Gave it away?' I exclaimed. 'To whom? And when?'

He moved uneasily on his seat and avoided my eye, his altered manner filling me with suspicions which the insight I had just obtained into his character did not altogether preclude. At last he said, 'I had nothing to do with it, if you mean that; nothing. On the contrary, I have done all I could to make it up to her. I followed her here. I swear that is so, M. de Marsac.'

'You have not told me yet to whom she gave it,' I said sternly.

'She gave it,' he muttered, 'to a priest.'

'To what priest?'

'I do not know his name. He is a Jacobin.'

'And why?' I asked, gazing incredulously at the student. 'Why did she give it to him? Come, come! have a care. Let me have none of your Sorbonne inventions!'

He hesitated a moment, looking at me timidly, and then seemed to make up his mind to tell me. 'He found out—it was when we lived in Paris, you understand, last June—that she was a Huguenot. It was about the time they burned the Foucards, and he frightened her with that, and made her pay him money, a little at first, and then more and more, to keep her secret. When the king came to Blois she followed his Majesty, thinking to be safer here; but the priest came too, and got more money, and more, until he left her—this.'

'This!' I said. And I set my teeth together.

Simon Fleix nodded.

I looked round the wretched garret to which my mother had been reduced, and pictured the days and hours of fear and suspense through which she had lived; through which she must have lived with that caitiff's threat hanging over her grey head! I thought of her birth and her humiliation, of her frail form and patient, undying love for me; and solemnly, and before heaven, I swore that night to punish the man. My anger was too great for words, and for tears I was too old. I asked Simon Fleix no more questions, save when the priest might be looked for again—which he could not tell me—and whether he would know him again—to which he answered, 'Yes.' But, wrapping myself in my cloak, I lay down by the fire and pondered long and sadly.

So, while I had been pinching there, my mother had been starving here. She had deceived me, and I her. The lamp flickered, throwing uncertain shadows as the draught tossed the strange window-curtain to and fro. The leakage from the roof fell drop by drop, and now and again the wind shook the crazy building, as though it would lift it up bodily and carry it away.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN EMPTY ROOM.

Desiring to start as early as possible, that we might reach Rosny on the second evening, I roused Simon Fleix before it was light, and learning from him where the horses were stabled, went out to attend to them; preferring to do this myself, that I might have an opportunity of seeking out a tailor, and providing myself with clothes better suited to my rank than those to which I had been reduced of late. I found that I still had ninety crowns left of the sum which

the King of Navarre had given me, and twelve of these I laid out on a doublet of black cloth with russet points and ribands, a dark cloak lined with the same sober colour, and a new cap and feather. The tradesman would fain have provided me with a new scabbard also, seeing my old one was worn-out at the heel; but this I declined, having a fancy to go with my point bare until I should have punished the scoundrel who had made my mother's failing days a misery to her; a business which, the King of Navarre's once done, I promised myself to pursue with energy and at all costs.

The choice of my clothes, and a few alterations which it was necessary to make in them, detained me some time, so that it was later than I could have wished when I turned my face towards the house again, bent on getting my party to horse as speedily as possible. The morning, I remember, was bright, frosty, and cold; the kennels were dry, the streets comparatively clean. Here and there a ray of early sunshine, darting between the overhanging eaves, gave promise of glorious travelling-weather. But the faces, I remarked in my walk, did not reflect the surrounding cheerfulness. Moody looks met me everywhere and on every side; and while courier after courier galloped by me bound for the castle, the townsfolk stood aloof in doorways listless and inactive, or, gathering in groups in corners, talked what I took to be treason under the breath. The queen-mother still lived, but Orleans had revolted, and Sens and Mans, Chartres and Melun. Rouen was said to be wavering, Lyons in arms, while Paris had deposed her king, and cursed him daily from a hundred altars. In fine, the great rebellion which followed the death of Guise, and lasted so many years, was already in progress; so that on this first day of the new year the king's writ scarce ran farther than he could see, peering anxiously out from the towers above my head.

Reaching the house, I climbed the long staircase hastily, abusing its darkness and foulness, and planning as I went how my mother might most easily and quickly be moved to

a better lodging. Gaining the top of the last flight, I saw that mademoiselle's door on the left of the landing was open, and concluding from this that she was up, and ready to start, I entered my mother's room with a brisk step and spirits reinforced by the crisp morning air.

But on the threshold I stopped, and stood silent and amazed. At first I thought the room was empty. Then, at a second glance, I saw the student. He was on his knees beside the bed in the alcove, from which the curtain had been partially dragged away. The curtain before the window had been torn down also, and the cold light of day, pouring in on the unsightly bareness of the room, struck a chill to my heart. A stool lay overturned by the fire, and above it a grey cat, which I had not hitherto noticed, crouched on a beam and eyed me with stealthy fierceness. Mademoiselle was not to be seen, nor was Fanchette, and Simon Fleix did not hear me. He was doing something at the bed—for my mother it seemed.

'What is it, man?' I cried softly, advancing on tiptoe to the bedside. 'Where are the others?'

The student looked round and saw me. His face was pale and gloomy. His eyes burned, and yet there were tears in them, and on his cheeks. He did not speak, but the chilliness, the bareness, the emptiness of the room spoke for him, and my heart sank.

I took him by the shoulders. 'Find your tongue, man!' I said angrily. 'Where are they?'

He rose from his knees and stood staring at me. 'They are gone!' he said stupidly.

'Gone?' I exclaimed. 'Impossible! When? Whither?'

'Half an hour ago. Whither—I do not know.'

Confounded and amazed, I glared at him between fear and rage. 'You do not know?' I cried. 'They are gone, and you do not know?'

He turned suddenly on me and gripped my arm. 'No, I do not know! I do not know!' he cried, with a complete change of manner and in a tone of fierce excitement.

'Only, may the fiend go with them! But I do know this. I know this, M. de Marsac, with whom they went, these friends of yours! A fop came, a dolt, a fine spark, and gave them fine words and fine speeches and a gold token, and, hey presto! they went, and forgot you!'

'What!' I cried, beginning to understand, and snatching fiercely at the one clue in his speech. 'A gold token? They have been decoyed away then! There is no time to be lost. I must follow.'

'No, for that is not all!' he replied, interrupting me sternly, while his grasp on my arm grew tighter and his eyes flashed as they looked into mine. 'You have not heard all. They have gone with one who called you an impostor, and a thief, and a beggar, and that to your mother's face—and killed her! Killed her as surely as if he had taken a sword to her, M. de Marsac! Will you, after that, leave her for them?'

He spoke plainly. And yet, God forgive me, it was some time before I understood him: before I took in the meaning of his words, or could transfer my thoughts from the absent to my mother lying on the bed before me. When I did do so, and turned to her, and saw her still face and thin hair straggling over the coarse pillow, then, indeed, the sight overcame me. I thought no more of others—for I thought her dead; and with a great and bitter cry I fell on my knees beside her and hid my face. What, after all, was this headstrong girl to me? what were even kings and king's commissions to me beside her—beside the one human being who loved me still, the one being of my blood and name left, the one ever-patient, ever-constant heart which for years had beaten only for me? For a while, for a few moments, I was worthy of her: for I forgot all others.

Simon Fleix roused me at last from my stupor, making me understand that she was not dead, but in a deep swoon, the result of the shock she had undergone. A leech, for whom he had despatched a neighbour, came in as I rose, and taking my place, presently restored her to consciou-

ness. But her extreme feebleness warned me not to hope for more than a temporary recovery; nor had I sat by her long before I discerned that this last blow, following on so many fears and privations, had reached a vital part, and that she was even now dying.

She lay for a while with her hand in mine and her eyes closed, but about noon, the student, contriving to give her some broth, she revived, and, recognising me, lay for more than an hour gazing at me with unspeakable content and satisfaction. At the end of that time, and when I thought she was past speaking, she signed to me to bend over her, and whispered something, which at first I could not catch. Presently I made it out to be, 'She is gone—The girl you brought?'

Much troubled, I answered yes, begging her not to think about the matter. I need not have feared, however, for when she spoke again she did so without emotion, and rather as one seeing clearly something before her.

'When you find her, Gaston,' she murmured, 'do not be angry with her. It was not her fault. She—he deceived her. See!'

I followed the direction rather of her eyes than her hand, and found beneath the pillow a length of gold chain. 'She left that?' I murmured, a strange tumult of emotions in my breast.

'She laid it there,' my mother whispered. 'And she would have stopped him saying what he did'—a shudder ran through my mother's frame at the remembrance of the man's words, though her eyes still gazed into mine with faith and confidence—'she would have stopped him, but she could not, Gaston. And then he hurried her away.'

'He showed her a token, madame, did he not?' I could not for my life repress the question, so much seemed to turn on the point.

'A bit of gold,' my mother whispered, smiling faintly. 'Now let me sleep.' And, clinging always to my hand, she closed her eyes.

The student came back soon afterwards with some comforts for which I had despatched him, and we sat by her until the evening fell, and far into the night. It was a relief to me to learn from the leech that she had been ailing for some time, and that in any case the end must have come soon. She suffered no pain and felt no fears, but meeting my eyes whenever she opened her own, or came out of the drowsiness which possessed her, thanked God, I think, and was content. As for me, I remember that room became, for the time, the world. Its stillness swallowed up all the tumults which filled the cities of France, and its one interest—the coming and going of a feeble breath—eclipsed the ambitions and hopes of a lifetime.

Before it grew light Simon Fleix stole out to attend to the horses. When he returned he came to me and whispered in my ear that he had something to tell me; and my mother lying in a quiet sleep at the time, I disengaged my hand, and, rising softly, went with him to the hearth.

Instead of speaking, he held his fist before me and suddenly unclosed the fingers. 'Do you know it?' he said, glancing at me abruptly.

I took what he held, and looking at it, nodded. It was a knot of velvet of a peculiar dark red colour, and had formed, as I knew the moment I set eyes on it, part of the fastening of mademoiselle's mask. 'Where did you find it?' I muttered, supposing that he had picked it up on the stairs.

'Look at it!' he answered impatiently. 'You have not looked.'

I turned it over, and then saw something which had escaped me at first—that the wider part of the velvet was disfigured by a fantastic stitching, done very roughly and rudely with a thread of white silk. The stitches formed letters, the letters words. With a start I read, '*A moi!*' and saw in a corner, in smaller stitches, the initials 'C. d. l. V.'

I looked eagerly at the student. 'Where did you find this?' I said.

'I picked it up in the street,' he answered quietly, 'not three hundred paces from here.'

I thought a moment. 'In the gutter, or near the wall?' I asked.

'Near the wall, to be sure.'

'Under a window?'

'Precisely,' he said. 'You may be easy; I am not a fool. I marked the place, M. de Marsac, and shall not forget it.'

Even the sorrow and solicitude I felt on my mother's behalf—feelings which had seemed a minute before to secure me against all other cares or anxieties whatever—were not proof against this discovery. For I found myself placed in a strait so cruel I must suffer either way. On the one hand, I could not leave my mother; I were a heartless ingrate to do that. On the other, I could not, without grievous pain, stand still and inactive while Mademoiselle de la Vire, whom I had sworn to protect, and who was now suffering through my laches and mischance, appealed to me for help. For I could not doubt that this was what the bow of velvet meant; still less that it was intended for me, since few save myself would be likely to recognise it, and she would naturally expect me to make some attempt at pursuit.

And I could not think little of the sign. Remembering mademoiselle's proud and fearless spirit, and the light in which she had always regarded me, I augured the worst from it. I felt assured that no imaginary danger and no emergency save the last would have induced her to stoop so low; and this consideration, taken with the fear I felt that she had fallen into the hands of Fresnoy, whom I believed to be the person who had robbed me of the gold coin, filled me with a horrible doubt which way my duty lay. I was pulled, as it were, both ways. I felt my honour engaged both to go and to stay, and while my hand went to my hilt, and my feet trembled to be gone, my eyes sought my mother, and my ears listened for her gentle breathing.

Perplexed and distracted, I looked at the student, and he at me. 'You saw the man who took her away,' I muttered.

Hitherto, in my absorption on my mother's account, I had put few questions, and let the matter pass as though it moved me little and concerned me less. 'What was he like? Was he a big, bloated man, Simon, with his head bandaged, or perhaps a wound on his face?'

'The gentleman who went away with mademoiselle, do you mean?' he asked.

'Yes, yes, gentleman if you like!'

'Not at all,' the student answered. 'He was a tall young gallant, very gaily dressed, dark-haired, and with a rich complexion. I heard him tell her that he came from a friend of hers too high to be named in public or in Blois. He added that he brought a token from him; and when mademoiselle mentioned you—she had just entered madame's room with her woman when he appeared——'

'He had watched me out, of course.'

'Just so. Well, when she mentioned you, he swore you were an adventurer, and a beggarly impostor, and what not, and bade her say whether she thought it likely that her friend would have entrusted such a mission to such a man.'

'And then she went with him?'

The student nodded.

'Readily? Of her own free-will?'

'Certainly,' he answered. 'It seemed so to me. She tried to prevent him speaking before your mother, but that was all.'

On the impulse of the moment I took a step towards the door; recollecting my position, I turned back with a groan. Almost beside myself, and longing for any vent for my feelings, I caught the lad by the shoulder, where he stood on the hearth, and shook him to and fro.

'Tell me, man, what am I to do?' I said between my teeth. 'Speak! think! invent something!'

But he shook his head.

I let him go with a muttered oath, and sat down on a stool by the bed and took my head between my hands. At that very moment, however, relief came—came from an un-

expected quarter. The door opened and the leech entered. He was a skilful man, and, though much employed about the Court, a Huguenot—a fact which had emboldened Simon Fleix to apply to him through the landlord of the 'Bleeding Heart,' the secret rendezvous of the Religion in Blois. When he had made his examination he was for leaving, being a grave and silent man, and full of business, but at the door I stopped him.

'Well, sir?' I said in a low tone, my hand on his cloak.

'She has rallied, and may live three days,' he answered quietly. 'Four, it may be, and as many more as God wills.'

Pressing two crowns into his hand, I begged him to call daily, which he promised to do; and then he went. My mother was still dozing peacefully, and I turned to Simon Fleix, my doubts resolved and my mind made up.

'Listen,' I said, 'and answer me shortly. We cannot both leave; that is certain. Yet I must go, and at once, to the place where you found the velvet knot. Do you describe the spot exactly, so that I may find it, and make no mistake.'

He nodded, and after a moment's reflection answered,

'You know the Rue St. Denys, M. de Marsac? Well, go down it, keeping the "Bleeding Heart" on your left. Take the second turning on the same side after passing the inn. The third house from the corner, on the left again, consists of a gateway leading to the Hospital of the Holy Cross. Above the gateway are two windows in the lower story, and above them two more. The knot lay below the first window you come to. Do you understand?'

'Perfectly,' I said. 'It is something to be a clerk, Simon.'

He looked at me thoughtfully, but added nothing; and I was busy tightening my sword-hilt, and disposing my cloak about the lower part of my face. When I had arranged this to my satisfaction, I took out and counted over the sum of thirty-five crowns, which I gave to him, impressing

on him the necessity of staying beside my mother should I not return; for though I proposed to reconnoitre only, and learn if possible whether mademoiselle was still in Blois, the future was uncertain, and whereas I was known to my enemies, they were strangers to me.

Having enjoined this duty upon him, I bade my mother a silent farewell, and, leaving the room, went slowly down the stairs, the picture of her worn and patient face going with me, and seeming, I remember, to hallow the purpose I had in my mind.

The clocks were striking the hour before noon as I stepped from the doorway, and, standing a moment in the lane, looked this way and that for any sign of espionage. I could detect none, however. The lane was deserted; and feeling assured that any attempt to mislead my opponents, who probably knew Blois better than I did, must fail, I made none, but deliberately took my way towards the 'Bleeding Heart,' in the Rue St. Denys. The streets presented the same appearance of gloomy suspense which I had noticed on the previous day. The same groups stood about in the same corners, the same suspicious glances met me in common with all other strangers who showed themselves; the same listless inaction characterised the townsfolk, the same anxious hurry those who came and went with news. I saw that even here, under the walls of the palace, the bonds of law and order were strained almost to bursting, and judged that if there ever was a time in France when right counted for little, and the strong hand for much, it was this. Such a state of things was not unfavourable to my present design, and caring little for suspicious looks, I went resolutely on my way.

I had no difficulty in finding the gateway of which Simon had spoken, or in identifying the window beneath which he had picked up the velvet knot. An alley opening almost opposite, I took advantage of this to examine the house at my leisure, and remarked at once, that whereas the lower window was guarded only by strong shutters, now open,

that in the story above was heavily barred. Naturally I concentrated my attention on the latter. The house, an old building of stone, seemed sufficiently reputable, nor could I discern anything about it which would have aroused my distrust had the knot been found elsewhere. It bore the arms of a religious brotherhood, and had probably at one time formed the principal entrance to the hospital, which still stood behind it, but it had now come, as I judged, to be used as a dwelling of the better class. Whether the two floors were separately inhabited or not I failed to decide.

After watching it for some time without seeing anyone pass in or out, or anything occurring to enlighten me one way or the other, I resolved to venture in, the street being quiet and the house giving no sign of being strongly garrisoned. The entrance lay under the archway, through a door on the right side. I judged from what I saw that the porter was probably absent, busying himself with his gossips in matters of State.

And this proved to be the case, for when I had made the passage of the street with success, and slipped quietly in through the half-open door, I found only his staff and charcoal-pan there to represent him. A single look satisfied me on that point; forthwith, without hesitation, I turned to the stairs and began to mount, assured that if I would effect anything single-handed I must trust to audacity and surprise rather than to caution or forethought.

The staircase was poorly lighted by loopholes looking towards the rear, but it was clean and well-kept. Silence, broken only by the sound of my footsteps, prevailed throughout the house, and all seemed so regular and decent and orderly that the higher I rose the lower fell my hopes of success. Still, I held resolutely on until I reached the second floor and stood before a closed door. The moment had come to put all to the touch. I listened for a few seconds, but hearing nothing, cautiously lifted the latch. Somewhat to my surprise the door yielded to my hand, and I entered.

A high settle stood inside, interrupting my view of the room, which seemed to be spacious and full of rich stuffs and furniture, but low in the roof, and somewhat dimly lighted by two windows rather wide than high. The warm glow of a fire shone on the woodwork of the ceiling, and as I softly closed the door a log on the hearth gave way, with a crackling of sparks, which pleasantly broke the luxurious silence. The next moment a low, sweet voice asked, 'Alphonse, is that you?'

I walked round the settle and came face to face with a beautiful woman reclining on a couch. On hearing the door open she had raised herself on her elbow. Now, seeing a stranger before her, she sprang up with a low cry, and stood gazing at me, her face expressing both astonishment and anger. She was of middling height, her features regular though somewhat childlike, her complexion singularly fair. A profusion of golden hair hung in disorder about her neck, and matched the deep blue of her eyes, wherein it seemed to me, there lurked more spirit and fire than the general cast of her features led one to expect.

After a moment's silence, during which she scanned me from head to foot with great haughtiness—and I her with curiosity and wonder—she spoke. 'Sir!' she said slowly, 'to what am I to attribute this—visit?'

For the moment I was so taken aback by her appearance and extraordinary beauty, as well as by the absence of any sign of those I sought, that I could not gather my thoughts to reply, but stood looking vaguely at her. I had expected, when I entered the room, something so different from this!

'Well, sir?' she said again, speaking sharply, and tapping her foot on the floor.

'This visit, madame?' I stammered.

'Call it intrusion, sir, if you please!' she cried imperiously. 'Only explain it, or begone.'

'I crave leave to do both, madame,' I answered, collecting myself by an effort. 'I ascended these stairs and opened your door in error—that is the simple fact—hoping to find

a friend of mine here. I was mistaken, it seems, and it only remains for me to withdraw, offering at the same time the humblest apologies.' And as I spoke I bowed low and prepared to retire.

'One moment, sir!' she said quickly, and in an altered tone. 'You are, perhaps, a friend of M. de Bruhl—of my husband. In that case, if you desire to leave any message I will—I shall be glad to deliver it.'

She looked so charming that, despite the tumult of my feelings, I could not but regard her with admiration. 'Alas! madame, I cannot plead that excuse,' I answered. 'I regret that I have not the honour of his acquaintance.'

She eyed me with some surprise. 'Yet still, sir,' she answered, smiling a little, and toying with a gold brooch which clasped her habit, 'you must have had some ground, some reason, for supposing you would find a friend here?'

'True, madame,' I answered, 'but I was mistaken.'

I saw her colour suddenly. With a smile and a faint twinkle of the eye she said, 'It is not possible, sir, I suppose—you have not come here, I mean, out of any reason connected with a—a knot of velvet, for instance?'

I started, and involuntarily advanced a step towards her. 'A knot of velvet!' I exclaimed, with emotion. 'Mon Dieu! Then I was not mistaken! I have come to the right house, and you—you know something of this! Madame,' I continued impulsively, 'that knot of velvet? Tell me what it means, I implore you!'

She seemed alarmed by my violence, retreating a step or two, and looking at me haughtily, yet with a kind of shamefacedness. 'Believe me, it means nothing,' she said hurriedly. 'I beg you to understand that, sir. It was a foolish jest.'

'A jest?' I said. 'It fell from this window.'

'It was a jest, sir,' she answered stubbornly. But I could see that, with all her pride, she was alarmed; her face was troubled, and there were tears in her eyes. And this rendered me under the circumstances only the more persistent.

'I have the velvet here, madame,' I said. 'You must tell me more about it.'

She looked at me with a weightier impulse of anger than she had yet exhibited. 'I do not think you know to whom you are speaking,' she said, breathing fast. 'Leave the room, sir, and at once! I have told you it was a jest. If you are a gentleman you will believe me, and go.' And she pointed to the door.

But I held my ground, with an obstinate determination to pierce the mystery. 'I am a gentleman, madame,' I said, 'and yet I must know more. Until I know more I cannot go.'

'Oh, this is insufferable!' she cried, looking round as if for a way of escape; but I was between her and the only door. 'This is unbearable! The knot was never intended for you, sir. And what is more, if M. de Bruhl come and find you here, you will repent it bitterly.'

I saw that she was at least as much concerned on her own account as on mine, and thought myself justified under the circumstances in taking advantage of her fears. I deliberately laid my cap on the table which stood beside me. 'I will go, madame,' I said, looking at her fixedly, 'when I know all that you know about this knot I hold, and not before. If you are unwilling to tell me, I must wait for M. de Bruhl, and ask him.'

She cried out 'Insolent!' and looked at me as if in her rage and dismay she would gladly have killed me; being, I could see, a passionate woman. But I held my ground, and after a moment she spoke. 'What do you want to know?' she said, frowning darkly.

'This knot—how did it come to lie in the street below your window? I want to know that first.'

'I dropped it,' she answered sullenly.

'Why?' I said.

'Because——' And then she stopped and looked at me, and then again looked down, her face crimson. 'Because, if you must know,' she continued hurriedly, tracing a

pattern on the table with her finger, 'I saw it bore the words "*A moi.*" I have been married only two months, and I thought my husband might find it—and bring it to me. It was a silly fancy.'

'But where did you get it?' I asked, and I stared at her in growing wonder and perplexity. For the more questions I put, the further, it seemed to me, I strayed from my object.

'I picked it up in the Ruelle d'Arcy,' she answered, tapping her foot on the floor resentfully. 'It was the silly thing put it into my head to—to do what I did. And now, have you any more questions, sir?'

'One only,' I said, seeing it all clearly enough. 'Will you tell me, please, exactly where you found it?'

'I have told you. In the Ruelle d'Arcy, ten paces from the Rue de Valois. Now, sir, will you go?'

'One word, madame. Did——'

But she cried, 'Go, sir, go! go!' so violently, that after making one more attempt to express my thanks, I thought it better to obey her. I had learned all she knew; I had solved the puzzle. But, solving it, I found myself no nearer to the end I had in view, no nearer to mademoiselle. I closed the door with a silent bow, and began to descend the stairs, my mind full of anxious doubts and calculations. The velvet knot was the only clue I possessed, but was I right in placing any dependence on it? I knew now that, wherever it had originally lain, it had been removed once. If once, why not twice? why not three times?

CHAPTER IX.

THE HOUSE IN THE RUELLE D'ARCY.

I HAD not gone down half a dozen steps before I heard a man enter the staircase from the street, and begin to ascend. It struck me at once that this might be M. de

Bruhl; and I realised that I had not left madame's apartment a moment too soon. The last thing I desired, having so much on my hands, was to embroil myself with a stranger, and accordingly I quickened my pace, hoping to meet him so near the foot of the stairs as to leave him in doubt whether I had been visiting the upper or lower part of the house. The staircase was dark, however, and being familiar with it, he had the advantage over me. He came leaping up two steps at a time, and turning the angle abruptly, surprised me before I was clear of the upper flight.

On seeing me, he stopped short and stared; thinking at first, I fancy, that he ought to recognise me. When he did not, he stood back a pace. 'Umph!' he said. 'Have you been—have you any message for me, sir?'

'No,' I said, 'I have not.'

He frowned. 'I am M. de Bruhl,' he said.

'Indeed?' I muttered, not knowing what else to say.

'You have been ——'

'Up your stairs, sir? Yes. In error,' I answered bluntly.

He gave a kind of grunt at that, and stood aside, incredulous and dissatisfied, yet uncertain how to proceed. I met his black looks with a steady countenance, and passed by him, becoming aware, however, as I went on down the stairs that he had turned and was looking after me. He was a tall, handsome man, dark, and somewhat ruddy of complexion, and was dressed in the extreme of Court fashion, in a suit of myrtle-green trimmed with sable. He carried also a cloak lined with the same on his arm. Beyond looking back when I reached the street, to see that he did not follow me, I thought no more of him. But we were to meet again, and often. Nay, had I then known all that was to be known I would have gone back and—— But of that in another place.

The Rue de Valois, to which a tradesman, who was peering cautiously out of his shop, directed me, proved to be one of the main streets of the city, narrow and dirty, and darkened by overhanging eaves and signboards, but full of

noise and bustle. One end of it opened on the *parvis* of the Cathedral; the other and quieter end appeared to abut on the west gate of the town. Feeling the importance of avoiding notice in the neighbourhood of the house I sought, I strolled into the open space in front of the Cathedral, and accosting two men who stood talking there, learned that the Ruelle d'Arcy was the third lane on the right of the Rue de Valois, and some little distance along it. Armed with this information I left them, and with my head bent down, and my cloak drawn about the lower part of my face, as if I felt the east wind, I proceeded down the street until I reached the opening of the lane. Without looking up I turned briskly into it.

When I had gone ten paces past the turning, however, I stopped and, gazing about me, began to take in my surroundings as fast as I could. The lane, which seemed little frequented, was eight or nine feet wide, unpaved, and full of ruts. The high blank wall of a garden rose on one side of it, on the other the still higher wall of a house; and both were completely devoid of windows, a feature which I recognised with the utmost dismay. For it completely upset all my calculations. In vain I measured with my eye the ten paces I had come; in vain I looked up, looked this way and that. I was nonplussed. No window opened on the lane at that point, nor, indeed, throughout its length. For it was bounded to the end, as far as I could see, by dead-walls as of gardens.

Recognising, with a sinking heart, what this meant, I saw in a moment that all the hopes I had raised on Simon Fleix's discovery were baseless. Mademoiselle had dropped the velvet bow, no doubt, but not from a window. It was still a clue, but one so slight and vague as to be virtually useless, proving only that she was in trouble and in need of help; perhaps that she had passed through this lane on her way from one place of confinement to another.

Thoroughly baffled and dispirited, I leant for awhile against the wall, brooding over the ill-luck which seemed

to attend me in this, as in so many previous adventures. Nor was the low voice of conscience, suggesting that such failures arose from mismanagement rather than from ill-luck, slow to make itself heard. I reflected that if I had not allowed myself to be robbed of the gold token, mademoiselle would have trusted me; that if I had not brought her to so poor an abode as my mother's, she would not have been cajoled into following a stranger; finally, that if I had remained with her, and sent Simon to attend to the horses in my place, no stranger would have gained access to her.

But it has never been my way to accept defeat at the first offer, and though I felt these self-reproaches to be well deserved, a moment's reflection persuaded me that in the singular and especial providence which had brought the velvet knot safe to my hands I ought to find encouragement. Had Madame de Bruhl not picked it up it would have continued to lie in this by-path, through which neither I nor Simon Fleix would have been likely to pass. Again, had madame not dropped it in her turn, we should have sought in vain for any, even the slightest, clue to Mademoiselle de la Vire's fate or position.

Cheered afresh by this thought, I determined to walk to the end of the lane; and forthwith did so, looking sharply about me as I went, but meeting no one. The bare upper branches of a tree rose here and there above the walls, which were pierced at intervals by low, strong doors. These doors I carefully examined, but without making any discovery; all were securely fastened, and many seemed to have been rarely opened. Emerging at last and without result on the inner side of the city ramparts, I turned, and moodily retraced my steps through the lane, proceeding more slowly as I drew near to the Rue de Valois. This time, being a little farther from the street, I made a discovery.

The corner house, which had its front on the Rue Valois, presented, as I have said, a dead, windowless wall to the lane; but from my present standpoint I could see the upper

part of the back of this house—that part of the back, I mean, which rose above the lower garden-wall that abutted on it —and in this there were several windows. The whole of two and a part of a third were within the range of my eyes; and suddenly in one of these I discovered something which made my heart beat high with hope and expectation. The window in question was heavily grated; that which I saw was tied to one of the bars. It was a small knot of some white stuff—linen apparently—and it seemed a trifle to the eye; but it was looped, as far as I could see from a distance, after the same fashion as the scrap of velvet I had in my pouch.

The conclusion was obvious, at the same time that it inspired me with the liveliest admiration of mademoiselle's wit and resources. She was confined in that room; the odds were that she was behind those bars. A bow dropped thence would fall, the wind being favourable, into the lane, not ten, but twenty paces from the street. I ought to have been prepared for a slight inaccuracy in a woman's estimate of distance.

It may be imagined with what eagerness I now scanned the house, with what minuteness I sought for a weak place. The longer I looked, however, the less comfort I derived from my inspection. I saw before me a gloomy stronghold of brick, four-square, and built in the old Italian manner, with battlements at the top, and a small machicolation, little more than a string-course, above each story; this serving at once to lessen the monotony of the dead-walls, and to add to the frowning weight of the upper part. The windows were few and small, and the house looked damp and mouldy; lichens clotted the bricks, and moss filled the string-courses. A low door opening from the lane into the garden naturally attracted my attention; but it proved to be of abnormal strength, and bolted both at the top and bottom.

Assured that nothing could be done on that side, and being unwilling to remain longer in the neighbourhood, lest I should attract attention, I returned to the street, and

twice walked past the front of the house, seeing all I could with as little appearance of seeing anything as I could compass. The front retreated somewhat from the line of the street, and was flanked on the farther side by stables. Only one chimney smoked, and that sparely. Three steps led up to imposing double doors, which stood half open, and afforded a glimpse of a spacious hall and a state staircase. Two men, apparently servants, lounged on the steps, eating chestnuts, and jesting with one another; and above the door were three shields blazoned in colours. I saw with satisfaction, as I passed the second time, that the middle coat was that of Turenne impaling one which I could not read—which thoroughly satisfied me that the bow of velvet had not lied; so that, without more ado, I turned homewards, formulating my plans as I went.

I found all as I had left it; and my mother still lying in a half-conscious state, I was spared the pain of making excuses for past absence, or explaining that which I designed. I communicated the plan I had formed to Simon Fleix, who saw no difficulty in procuring a respectable person to stay with Madame de Bonne. But for some time he would come no farther into the business. He listened, his mouth open and his eyes glittering, to my plan until I came to his share in it; and then he fell into a violent fit of trembling.

'You want me to fight, monsieur,' he cried reproachfully, shaking all over like one in the palsy. 'You said so the other night. You want to get me killed! That's it.'

'Nonsense!' I answered sharply. 'I want you to hold the horses!'

He looked at me wildly, with a kind of resentment in his face, and yet as if he were fascinated.

'You will drag me into it!' he persisted. 'You will!'

'I won't,' I said.

'You will! You will! And the end I know. I shall have no chance. I am a clerk, and not bred to fighting. You want to be the death of me!' he cried excitedly.

'I don't want you to fight,' I answered with some contempt. 'I would rather that you kept out of it for my mother's sake. I only want you to stay in the lane and hold the horses. You will run little more risk than you do sitting by the hearth here.'

And in the end I persuaded him to do what I wished; though still, whenever he thought of what was in front of him, he fell a-trembling again, and many times during the afternoon got up and walked to and fro between the window and the hearth, his face working and his hands clenched like those of a man in a fever. I put this down at first to sheer chicken-heartedness, and thought it augured ill for my enterprise; but presently remarking that he made no attempt to draw back, and that though the sweat stood on his brow he set about such preparations as were necessary —remembering also how long and kindly, and without pay or guerdon, he had served my mother, I began to see that here was something phenomenal; a man strange and beyond the ordinary, of whom it was impossible to predicate what he would do when he came to be tried.

For myself, I passed the afternoon in a state almost of apathy. I thought it my duty to make this attempt to free mademoiselle, and to make it at once, since it was impossible to say what harm might come of delay, were she in such hands as Fresnoy's; but I had so little hope of success that I regarded the enterprise as desperate. The certain loss of my mother, however, and the low ebb of my fortunes, with the ever-present sense of failure, contributed to render me indifferent to risks; and even when we were on our way, through by-streets known to Simon, to the farther end of the Ruelle d'Arcy, and the red and frosty sunset shone in our faces, and gilded for a moment the dull eaves and grey towers above us, I felt no softening. Whatever the end, there was but one in the world whom I should regret, or who would regret me; and she hung, herself, on the verge of eternity.

So that I was able to give Simon Fleix his last directions

with as much coolness as I ever felt in my life. I stationed him with the three horses in the lane—which seemed as quiet and little frequented as in the morning—near the end of it, and about a hundred paces or more from the house.

'Turn their heads towards the ramparts,' I said, wheeling them round myself, 'and then they will be ready to start. They are all quiet enough. You can let the Cid loose. And now listen to me, Simon,' I continued. 'Wait here until you see me return, or until you see you are going to be attacked. In the first case, stay for me, of course; in the second, save yourself as you please. Lastly, if neither event occurs before half-past five—you will hear the convent-bell yonder ring at the half-hour—begone, and take the horses; they are yours. And one word more,' I added hurriedly. 'If you can only get away with one horse, Simon, take the Cid. It is worth more than most men, and will not fail you at a pinch.'

As I turned away, I gave him one look to see if he understood. It was not without hesitation that after that look I left him. The lad's face was flushed, he was breathing hard, his eyes seemed to be almost starting from his head. He sat his horse shaking in every limb, and had all the air of a man in a fit. I expected him to call me back; but he did not, and reflecting that I must trust him, or give up the attempt, I went up the lane with my sword under my arm, and my cloak loose on my shoulders. I met a man driving a donkey laden with faggots. I saw no one else. It was already dusk between the walls, though light enough in the open country; but that was in my favour, my only regret being that as the town gates closed shortly after half-past five, I could not defer my attempt until a still later hour.

Pausing in the shadow of the house while a man might count ten, I impressed on my memory the position of the particular window which bore the knot; then I passed quickly into the street, which was still full of movement, and for a second, feeling myself safe from observation in the crowd, I stood looking at the front of the house. The

door was shut. My heart sank when I saw this, for I had looked to find it still open.

The feeling, however, that I could not wait, though time might present more than one opportunity, spurred me on. What I could do I must do now, at once. The sense that this was so being heavy upon me, I saw nothing for it but to use the knocker and gain admission, by fraud if I could, and if not, by force. Accordingly I stepped briskly across the kennel, and made for the entrance.

When I was within two paces of the steps, however, someone abruptly threw the door open and stepped out. The man did not notice me, and I stood quickly aside, hoping that at the last minute my chance had come. Two men, who had apparently attended this first person downstairs, stood respectfully behind him, holding lights. He paused a moment on the steps to adjust his cloak, and with more than a little surprise I recognised my acquaintance of the morning, M. de Bruhl.

I had scarcely time to identify him before he walked down the steps swinging his cane, brushed carelessly past me, and was gone. The two men looked after him awhile, shading their lights from the wind, and one saying something, the other laughed coarsely. The next moment they threw the door to and went, as I saw by the passage of their light, into the room on the left of the hall.

Now was my time. I could have hoped for, prayed for, expected no better fortune than this. The door had rebounded slightly from the jamb, and stood open an inch or more. In a second I pushed it from me gently, slid into the hall, and closed it behind me.

The door of the room on the left was wide open, and the light which shone through the doorway—otherwise the hall was dark—as well as the voices of the two men I had seen, warned me to be careful. I stood, scarcely daring to breathe, and looked about me. There was no matting on the floor, no fire on the hearth. The hall felt cold, damp, and uninhabited. The state staircase rose in front of me, and pres-

ently bifurcating, formed a gallery round the place. I looked up, and up, and far above me, in the dim heights of the second floor, I espied a faint light—perhaps, the reflection of a light.

A movement in the room on my left warned me that I had no time to lose, if I meant to act. At any minute one of the men might come out and discover me. With the utmost care I started on my journey. I stole across the stone floor of the hall easily and quietly enough, but I found the real difficulty begin when I came to the stairs. They were of wood, and creaked and groaned under me to such an extent that, with each step I trod, I expected the men to take the alarm. Fortunately all went well until I passed the first corner—I chose, of course, the left-hand flight—then a board jumped under my foot with a crack which sounded in the empty hall, and to my excited ears, as loud as a pistol-shot. I was in two minds whether I should not on the instant make a rush for it, but happily I stood still. One of the men came out and listened, and I heard the other ask, with an oath, what it was. I leant against the wall, holding my breath.

'Only that wench in one of her tantrums!' the man who had come out answered, applying an epithet to her which I will not set down, but which I carried to his account in the event of our coming face to face presently. 'She is quiet now. She may hammer and hammer, but——'

The rest I lost, as he passed through the doorway and went back to his place by the fire. But in one way his words were of advantage to me. I concluded that I need not be so very cautious now, seeing that they would set down anything they heard to the same cause; and I sped on more quickly. I had just gained the second floor landing when a loud noise below—the opening of the street door and the heavy tread of feet in the hall—brought me to a temporary standstill. I looked cautiously over the balustrade, and saw two men go across to the room on the left. One of them spoke as he entered, chiding the other

knaves, I fancied, for leaving the door unbarred; and the tone, though not the words, echoing sullenly up the staircase, struck a familiar chord in my memory. The voice was Fresnoy's!

CHAPTER X.

THE FIGHT ON THE STAIRS.

THE certainty, which this sound gave me, that I was in the right house, and that it held also the villain to whom I owed all my misfortunes—for who but Fresnoy could have furnished the broken coin which had deceived mademoiselle?—had a singularly inspiriting effect upon me. I felt every muscle in my body grow on the instant hard as steel, my eyes more keen, my ears sharper—all my senses more apt and vigorous. I stole off like a cat from the balustrade, over which I had been looking, and without a second's delay began the search for mademoiselle's room; reflecting that though the garrison now amounted to four, I had no need to despair. If I could release the prisoners without noise—which would be easy were the key in the lock—we might hope to pass through the hall by a *tour de force* of one kind or another. And a church-clock at this moment striking Five, and reminding me that we had only half an hour in which to do all and reach the horses, I was the more inclined to risk something.

The light which I had seen from below hung in a flat-bottomed lantern just beyond the head of the stairs, and outside the entrance to one of two passages which appeared to lead to the back part of the house. Suspecting that M. de Bruhl's business had lain with mademoiselle, I guessed that the light had been placed for his convenience. With this clue and the position of the window to guide me, I fixed on a door on the right of this passage, and scarcely four paces from the head of the stairs. Before I made any

sign, however, I knelt down and ascertained that there was a light in the room, and also that the key was not in the lock.

So far satisfied, I scratched on the door with my finger-nails, at first softly, then with greater force, and presently I heard someone in the room rise. I felt sure that the person, whoever it was, had taken the alarm and was listening, and putting my lips to the keyhole I whispered mademoiselle's name.

A footstep crossed the room sharply, and I heard muttering just within the door. I thought I detected two voices. But I was impatient, and, getting no answer, whispered in the same manner as before, 'Mademoiselle de la Vire, are you there?'

Still no answer. The muttering, too, had stopped, and all was still—in the room, and in the silent house. I tried again. 'It is I, Gaston de Marsac,' I said. 'Do you hear? I am come to release you.' I spoke as loudly as I dared, but most of the sound seemed to come back on me and wander in suspicious murmurings down the staircase.

This time, however, an exclamation of surprise rewarded me, and a voice, which I recognised at once as mademoiselle's, answered softly:

'What is it? Who is there?'

'Gaston de Marsac,' I answered. 'Do you need my help?'

The very brevity of her reply; the joyful sob which accompanied it, and which I detected even through the door; the wild cry of thankfulness—almost an oath—of her companion—all these assured me at once that I was welcome—welcome as I had never been before—and, so assuring me, braced me to the height of any occasion which might befall.

'Can you open the door?' I muttered. All the time I was on my knees, my attention divided between the inside of the room and the stray sounds which now and then came up to me from the hall below. 'Have you the key?'

'No; we are locked in,' mademoiselle answered.

I expected this. 'If the door is bolted inside,' I whispered, 'unfasten it, if you please.'

They answered that it was not, so bidding them stand back a little from it, I rose and set my shoulder against it. I hoped to be able to burst it in with only one crash, which by itself, a single sound, might not alarm the men downstairs. But my weight made no impression upon the lock, and the opposite wall being too far distant to allow me to get any purchase for my feet, I presently desisted. The closeness of the door to the jambs warned me that an attempt to prise it open would be equally futile; and for a moment I stood gazing in perplexity at the solid planks, which bid fair to baffle me to the end.

The position was, indeed, one of great difficulty, nor can I now think of any way out of it better or other than that which I adopted. Against the wall near the head of the stairs I had noticed, as I came up, a stout wooden stool. I stole out and fetched this, and setting it against the opposite wall, endeavoured in this way to get sufficient purchase for my feet. The lock still held; but, as I threw my whole weight on the door, the panel against which I leaned gave way and broke inwards with a loud, crashing sound, which echoed through the empty house, and might almost have been heard in the street outside.

It reached the ears, at any rate, of the men sitting below, and I heard them troop noisily out and stand in the hall, now talking loudly, and now listening. A minute of breathless suspense followed—it seemed a long minute; and then, to my relief, they tramped back again, and I was free to return to my task. Another thrust, directed a little lower, would, I hoped, do the business; but to make this the more certain I knelt down and secured the stool firmly against the wall. As I rose after settling it, something else, without sound or warning, rose also, taking me completely by surprise—a man's head above the top stair, which, as it happened, faced me. His eyes met mine, and I knew I was discovered.

He turned and bundled downstairs again with a scared face, going so quickly that I could not have caught him if I would, or had had the wit to try. Of silence there was no longer need. In a few seconds the alarm would be raised. I had small time for thought. Laying myself bodily against the door, I heaved and pressed with all my strength; but whether I was careless in my haste, or the cause was other, the lock did not give. Instead the stool slipped, and I fell with a crash on the floor at the very moment the alarm reached the men below.

I remember that the crash of my unlucky fall seemed to release all the prisoned noises of the house. A faint scream within the room was but a prelude, lost the next moment in the roar of dismay, the clatter of weapons, and volley of oaths and cries and curses which, rolling up from below, echoed hollowly about me, as the startled knaves rushed to their weapons, and charged across the flags and up the staircase. I had space for one desperate effort. Picking myself up, I seized the stool by two of its legs and dashed it twice against the door, driving in the panel I had before splintered. But that was all. The lock held, and I had no time for a third blow. The men were already halfway up the stairs. In a breath almost they would be upon me. I flung down the useless stool and snatched up my sword, which lay unsheathed beside me. So far the matter had gone against us, but it was time for a change of weapons now, and the end was not yet. I sprang to the head of the stairs and stood there, my arm by my side and my point resting on the floor, in such an attitude of preparedness as I could compass at the moment.

For I had not been in the house all this time, as may well be supposed, without deciding what I would do in case of surprise, and exactly where I could best stand on the defensive. The flat bottom of the lamp which hung outside the passage threw a deep shadow on the spot immediately below it, while the light fell brightly on the steps beyond. Standing in the shadow I could reach the edge of

the stairs with my point, and swing the blade freely, without fear of the balustrade; and here I posted myself with a certain grim satisfaction as Fresnoy, with his three comrades behind him, came bounding up the last flight.

They were four to one, but I laughed to see how, not abruptly, but shamefacedly and by degrees, they came to a stand halfway up the flight, and looked at me, measuring the steps and the advantage which the light shining in their eyes gave me. Fresnoy's ugly face was rendered uglier by a great strip of plaister which marked the place where the hilt of my sword had struck him in our last encounter at Chizé; and this and the hatred he bore to me gave a peculiar malevolence to his look. The deaf man, Matthew, whose savage stolidity had more than once excited my anger on our journey, came next to him. the two strangers whom I had seen in the hall bringing up the rear. Of the four, these last seemed the most anxious to come to blows, and had Fresnoy not barred the way with his hand we should have crossed swords without parley.

'Halt, will you!' he cried, with an oath, thrusting one of them back. And then to me he said, 'So, so, my friend! It is you, is it?'

I looked at him in silence, with a scorn which knew no bounds, and did not so much as honour him by raising my sword, though I watched him heedfully.

'What are you doing here?' he continued, with an attempt at bluster.

Still I would not answer him, or move, but stood looking down at him. After a moment of this, he grew restive, his temper being churlish and impatient at the best. Besides, I think he retained just so much of a gentleman's feelings as enabled him to understand my contempt and smart under it. He moved a step upward, his brow dark with passion.

'You beggarly son of a scarecrow!' he broke out on a sudden, adding a string of foul imprecations, 'will you speak, or are you going to wait to be spitted where you stand? If we once begin, my bantam, we shall not stop

until we have done your business! If you have anything to say, say it, and——' But I omit the rest of his speech, which was foul beyond the ordinary.

Still I did not move or speak, but looked at him unwavering, though it pained me to think the women heard. He made a last attempt. 'Come, old friend,' he said, swallowing his anger again, or pretending to do so, and speaking with a vile *bonhomie* which I knew to be treacherous, 'if we come to blows we shall give you no quarter. But one chance you shall have, for the sake of old days when we followed Condé. Go! Take the chance, and go. We will let you pass, and that broken door shall be the worst of it. That is more,' he added with a curse, 'than I would do for any other man in your place, M. de Marsac.'

A sudden movement and a low exclamation in the room behind me showed that his words were heard there; and these sounds being followed immediately by a noise as of riving wood, mingled with the quick breathing of someone hard at work, I judged that the women were striving with the door—enlarging the opening it might be. I dared not look round, however, to see what progress they made, nor did I answer Fresnoy, save by the same silent contempt, but stood watching the men before me with the eye of a fencer about to engage. And I know nothing more keen, more vigilant, more steadfast than that.

It was well I did, for without signal or warning the group wavered a moment, as though retreating, and the next instant precipitated itself upon me. Fortunately, only two could engage me at once, and Fresnoy, I noticed, was not of the two who dashed forward up the steps. One of the strangers forced himself to the front, and, taking the lead, pressed me briskly, Matthew seconding him in appearance, while really watching for an opportunity of running in and stabbing me at close quarters, a manœuvre I was not slow to detect.

That first bout lasted half a minute only. A fierce exultant joy ran through me as the steel rang and grated, and I

found that I had not mistaken the strength of wrist or position. The men were mine. They hampered one another on the stairs, and fought in fetters, being unable to advance or retreat, to lunge with freedom, or give back without fear. I apprehended greater danger from Matthew than from my actual opponent, and presently, watching my opportunity, disarmed the latter by a strong parade, and sweeping Matthew's sword aside by the same movement, slashed him across the forehead; then, drawing back a step, gave my first opponent the point. He fell in a heap on the floor, as good as dead, and Matthew, dropping his sword, staggered backwards and downwards into Fresnoy's arms.

'Bonne Foi! France et Bonne Foi!' It seemed to me that I had not spoken, that I had plied steel in grimmest silence; and yet the cry still rang and echoed in the roof as I lowered my point, and stood looking grimly down at them. Fresnoy's face was disfigured with rage and chagrin. They were now but two to one, for Matthew, though his wound was slight, was disabled by the blood which ran down into his eyes and blinded him. 'France et Bonne Foi!'

'Bonne Foi and good sword!' cried a voice behind me. And looking swiftly round, I saw mademoiselle's face thrust through the hole in the door. Her eyes sparkled with a fierce light, her lips were red beyond the ordinary, and her hair, loosened and thrown into disorder by her exertions, fell in thick masses about her white cheeks, and gave her the aspect of a war-witch, such as they tell of in my country of Brittany. 'Good sword!' she cried again, and clapped her hands.

'But better board, mademoiselle!' I answered gaily. Like most of the men of my province, I am commonly melancholic, but I have the habit of growing witty at such times as these. 'Now, M. Fresnoy,' I continued, 'I am waiting your convenience. Must I put on my cloak to keep myself warm?'

He answered by a curse, and stood looking at me irresolutely. 'If you will come down,' he said.

'Send your man away and I will come,' I answered briskly. 'There is space on the landing, and a moderate light. But I must be quick. Mademoiselle and I are due elsewhere, and we are late already.'

Still he hesitated. Still he looked at the man lying at his feet—who had stretched himself out and passed, quietly enough, a minute before—and stood dubious, the most pitiable picture of cowardice and malice—he being ordinarily a stout man—I ever saw. I called him poltroon and white-feather, and was considering whether I had not better go down to him, seeing that our time must be up, and Simon would be quitting his post, when a cry behind me caused me to turn, and I saw that mademoiselle was no longer looking through the opening in the door.

Alarmed on her behalf, as I reflected that there might be other doors to the room, and the men have other accomplices in the house, I sprang to the door to see, but had barely time to send a single glance round the interior—which showed me only that the room was still occupied—before Fresnoy, taking advantage of my movement and of my back being turned, dashed up the stairs, with his comrade at his heels, and succeeded in penning me into the narrow passage where I stood.

I had scarcely time, indeed, to turn and put myself on guard before he thrust at me. Nor was that all. The superiority in position no longer lay with me. I found myself fighting between walls close to the opening in the door, through which the light fell athwart my eyes, baffling and perplexing me. Fresnoy was not slow to see the aid this gave him, and pressed me hard and desperately; so that we played for a full minute at close quarters, thrusting and parrying, neither of us having room to use the edge, or time to utter word or prayer.

At this game we were so evenly matched that for a time the end was hard to tell. Presently, however, there came a change. My opponent's habit of wild living suited ill with a prolonged bout, and as his strength and breath failed

and he began to give ground I discerned I had only to wear him out to have him at my mercy. He felt this himself, and even by that light I saw the sweat spring in great drops to his forehead, saw the terror grow in his eyes. Already I was counting him a dead man and the victory mine, when something flashed behind his blade, and his comrade's poniard, whizzing past his shoulder, struck me fairly on the chin, staggering me and hurling me back dizzy and half-stunned, uncertain what had happened to me.

Sped an inch lower it would have done its work and finished mine. Even as it was, my hand going up as I reeled back gave Fresnoy an opening, of which he was not slow to avail himself. He sprang forward. lunging at me furiously, and would have run me through there and then, and ended the matter, had not his foot, as he advanced, caught in the stool, which still lay against the wall. He stumbled, his point missed my hip by a hair's breadth, and he himself fell all his length on the floor, his rapier breaking off short at the hilt.

His one remaining backer stayed to cast a look at him, and that was all. The man fled, and I chased him as far as the head of the stairs; where I left him, assured by the speed and agility he displayed in clearing flight after flight that I had nothing to fear from him. Fresnoy lay, apparently stunned, and completely at my mercy. I stood an instant looking down at him, in two minds whether I should not run him through. But the memory of old days, when he had played his part in more honourable fashion and shown a coarse good-fellowship in the field, held my hand; and flinging a curse at him, I turned in anxious haste to the door, the centre of all this bloodshed and commotion. The light still shone through the breach in the panel, but for some minutes--since Fresnoy's rush up the stairs, indeed—I had heard no sound from this quarter. Now, looking in with apprehensions which grew with the continuing silence, I learned the reason. The room was empty!

Such a disappointment in the moment of triumph was

hard to bear. I saw myself, after all done and won, on the point of being again outwitted, distanced, it might be fooled. In frantic haste and excitement I snatched up the stool beside me, and, dashing it twice against the lock, forced it at last to yield. The door swung open, and I rushed into the room, which, abandoned by those who had so lately occupied it, presented nothing to detain me. I cast a single glance round, saw that it was squalid, low-roofed, unfurnished, a mere prison; then swiftly crossing the floor, I made for a door at the farther end, which my eye had marked from the first. A candle stood flaring and guttering on a stool, and as I passed I took it up.

Somewhat to my surprise the door yielded to my touch. In trembling haste—for what might not befall the women while I fumbled with doors or wandered in passages?—I flung it wide, and passing through it, found myself at the head of a narrow, mean staircase, leading, doubtless, to the servants' offices. At this, and seeing no hindrance before me, I took heart of grace, reflecting that mademoiselle might have escaped from the house this way. Though it would now be too late to quit the city, I might still overtake her, and all end well. Accordingly I hurried down the stairs, shading my candle as I went from a cold draught of air which met me, and grew stronger as I descended; until reaching the bottom at last, I came abruptly upon an open door, and an old, wrinkled, shrivelled woman.

The hag screamed at sight of me, and crouched down on the floor; and doubtless, with my drawn sword, and the blood dripping from my chin and staining all the front of my doublet, I looked fierce and uncanny enough. But I felt it was no time for sensibility—I was panting to be away—and I demanded of her sternly where they were. She seemed to have lost her voice—through fear, perhaps—and for answer only stared at me stupidly; but on my handling my weapon with some readiness she so far recovered her senses as to utter two loud screams, one after the other, and point to the door beside her. I doubted her;

and yet I thought in her terror she must be telling the truth, the more as I saw no other door. In any case I must risk it, so, setting the candle down on the step beside her, I passed out.

For a moment the darkness was so intense that I felt my way with my sword before me, in absolute ignorance where I was or on what my foot might next rest. I was at the mercy of anyone who chanced to be lying in wait for me; and I shivered as the cold damp wind struck my cheek and stirred my hair. But by-and-by, when I had taken two or three steps, my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, and I made out the naked boughs of trees between myself and the sky, and guessed that I was in a garden. My left hand, touching a shrub, confirmed me in this belief, and in another moment I distinguished something like the outline of a path stretching away before me. Following it rapidly—as rapidly as I dared—I came to a corner, as it seemed to me, turned it blindly, and stopped short, peering into a curtain of solid blackness which barred my path, and overhead mingled confusedly with the dark shapes of trees. But this, too, after a brief hesitation, I made out to be a wall. Advancing to it with outstretched hands, I felt the woodwork of a door, and, groping about, lit presently on a loop of cord. I pulled at this, the door yielded, and I went out.

I found myself in a narrow, dark lane, and looking up and down discovered, what I might have guessed before, that it was the Ruelle d'Arcy. But mademoiselle? Fanchette? Simon? Where were they? No one was to be seen. Tormented by doubts, I lifted up my voice and called on them in turn; first on mademoiselle, then on Simon Fleix. In vain; I got no answer. High up above me I saw, as I stood back a little, lights moving in the house I had left; and the suspicion that, after all, the enemy had foiled me grew upon me. Somehow they had decoyed mademoiselle to another part of the house, and then the old woman had misled me!

I turned fiercely to the door, which I had left ajar, resolved to re-enter by the way I had come, and have an explanation whether or no. To my surprise—for I had not moved six paces from the door nor heard the slightest sound—I found it not only closed but bolted—bolted both at top and bottom, as I discovered on trying it.

I fell on that to kicking it furiously, desperately; partly in a tempest of rage and chagrin, partly in the hope that I might frighten the old woman, if it was she who had closed it, into opening it again. In vain, of course; and presently I saw this and desisted, and, still in a whirl of haste and excitement, set off running towards the place where I had left Simon Fleix and the horses. It was fully six o'clock as I judged; but some faint hope that I might find him there with mademoiselle and her woman still lingered in my mind. I reached the end of the lane, I ran to the very foot of the ramparts, I looked right and left. In vain. The place was dark, silent, deserted.

I called 'Simon! Simon! Simon Fleix!' but my only answer was the soughing of the wind in the eaves, and the slow tones of the convent-bell striking Six.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MAN AT THE DOOR.

THERE are some things, not shameful in themselves, which it shames one to remember, and among these I count the succeeding hurry and perturbation of that night: the vain search, without hope or clue, to which passion impelled me, and the stubborn persistence with which I rushed frantically from place to place long after the soberness of reason would have had me desist. There was not, it seems to me, looking back now, one street or alley, lane or court, in Blois which I did not visit again and again in my

frantic wanderings; not a beggar skulking on foot that night whom I did not hunt down and question; not a wretched woman sleeping in arch or doorway whom I did not see and scrutinise. I returned to my mother's lodging again and again, always fruitlessly. I rushed to the stables and rushed away again, or stood and listened in the dark, empty stalls, wondering what had happened, and torturing myself with suggestions of this or that. And everywhere, not only at the North-gate, where I interrogated the porters and found that no party resembling that which I sought had passed out, but on the *parvis* of the Cathedral, where a guard was drawn up, and in the common streets, where I burst in on one group and another with my queries, I ran the risk of suspicion and arrest, and all that might follow thereon.

It was strange indeed that I escaped arrest. The wound in my chin still bled at intervals, staining my doublet; and as I was without my cloak, which I had left in the house in the Rue Valois, I had nothing to cover my disordered dress. I was keenly, fiercely anxious. Stray passers meeting me in the glare of a torch, or seeing me hurry by the great braziers which burned where four streets met, looked askance at me and gave me the wall; while men in authority cried to me to stay and answer their questions. I ran from the one and the other with the same savage impatience, disregarding everything in the feverish anxiety which spurred me on and impelled me to a hundred imprudences, such as at my age I should have blushed to commit. Much of this feeling was due, no doubt, to the glimpse I had had of mademoiselle, and the fiery words she had spoken; more, I fancy, to chagrin and anger at the manner in which the cup of success had been dashed at the last moment from my lips.

For four hours I wandered through the streets, now hot with purpose, now seeking aimlessly. It was ten o'clock when at length I gave up the search, and, worn out both in body and mind, climbed the stairs at my mother's lodgings

and entered her room. An old woman sat by the fire, crooning softly to herself, while she stirred something in a black pot. My mother lay in the same heavy, deep sleep in which I had left her. I sat down opposite the nurse (who cried out at my appearance) and asked her dully for some food. When I had eaten it, sitting in a kind of stupor the while, the result partly of my late exertions, and partly of the silence which prevailed round me, I bade the woman call me if any change took place; and then going heavily across to the garret Simon had occupied, I lay down on his pallet, and fell into a sound, dreamless sleep.

The next day and the next night I spent beside my mother, watching the life ebb fast away, and thinking with grave sorrow of her past and my future. It pained me beyond measure to see her die thus, in a garret, without proper attendance or any but bare comforts; the existence which had once been bright and prosperous ending in penury and gloom, such as my mother's love and hope and self-sacrifice little deserved. Her state grieved me sharply on my own account too, seeing that I had formed none of those familiar relations which men of my age have commonly formed, and which console them for the loss of parents and forbears; Nature so ordering it, as I have taken note, that men look forward rather than backward, and find in the ties they form with the future full compensation for the parting strands behind them. I was alone, poverty-stricken, and in middle life, seeing nothing before me except danger and hardship, and these unrelieved by hope or affection. This last adventure, too, despite all my efforts, had sunk me deeper in the mire; by increasing my enemies and alienating from me some to whom I might have turned at the worst. In one other respect also it had added to my troubles not a little; for the image of mademoiselle wandering alone and unguarded through the streets, or vainly calling on me for help, persisted in thrusting itself on my imagination when I least wanted it, and came even between my mother's patient face and me.

I was sitting beside Madame de Bonne a little after sunset on the second day, the woman who attended her being absent on an errand, when I remarked that the lamp, which had been recently lit, and stood on a stool in the middle of the room, was burning low and needed snuffing. I went to it softly, and while stooping over it, trying to improve the light, heard a slow, heavy step ascending the stairs. The house was quiet, and the sound attracted my full attention. I raised myself and stood listening, hoping that this might be the doctor, who had not been that day.

The footsteps passed the landing below, but at the first stair of the next flight the person, whoever it was, stumbled, and made a considerable noise. At that, or it might be a moment later, the step still ascending, I heard a sudden rustling behind me, and, turning quickly with a start, saw my mother sitting up in bed. Her eyes were open, and she seemed fully conscious; which she had not been for days, nor indeed since the last conversation I have recorded. But her face, though it was now sensible, was pinched and white, and so drawn with mortal fear that I believed her dying, and sprang to her, unable to construe otherwise the pitiful look in her straining eyes.

'Madame,' I said, hastily passing my arm round her, and speaking with as much encouragement as I could infuse into my voice, 'take comfort. I am here. Your son.'

'Hush!' she muttered in answer, laying her feeble hand on my wrist and continuing to look, not at me, but at the door. 'Listen, Gaston! Don't you hear? There it is again. Again!'

For a moment I thought her mind still wandered, and I shivered, having no fondness for hearing such things. Then I saw she was listening intently to the sound which had attracted my notice. The step had reached the landing by this time. The visitor, whoever it was, paused there a moment, being in darkness, and uncertain, perhaps, of the position of the door; but in a little while I heard him move forward again, my mother's fragile form, clasped

as it was in my embrace, quivering with each step he took, as though his weight stirred the house. He tapped at the door.

I had thought, while I listened and wondered, of more than one whom this might be: the leech, Simon Fleix, Madame Bruhl, Fresnoy even. But as the tap came, and I felt my mother tremble in my arms, enlightenment came with it, and I pondered no more. I knew as well as if she had spoken and told me. There could be only one man whose presence had such power to terrify her, only one whose mere step, sounding through the veil, could drag her back to consciousness and fear! And that was the man who had beggared her, who had traded so long on her terrors.

I moved a little, intending to cross the floor softly, that when he opened the door he might find me face to face with him; but she detected the movement, and, love giving her strength, she clung to my wrist so fiercely that I had not the heart, knowing how slender was her hold on life and how near the brink she stood, to break from her. I constrained myself to stand still, though every muscle grew tense as a drawn bowstring, and I felt the strong rage rising in my throat and choking me as I waited for him to enter.

A log on the hearth gave way with a dull sound startling in the silence. The man tapped again, and getting no answer, for neither of us spoke, pushed the door slowly open, uttering before he showed himself the words, 'Dieu vous bénisse!' in a voice so low and smooth I shuddered at the sound. The next moment he came in and saw me, and, starting, stood at gaze, his head thrust slightly forward, his shoulders bent, his hand still on the latch, amazement and frowning spite in turn distorting his lean face. He had looked to find a weak, defenceless woman, whom he could torture and rob at his will; he saw instead a strong man armed, whose righteous anger he must have been blind indeed had he failed to read.

Strangest thing of all, we had met before! I knew him at once — he me. He was the same Jacobin monk whom I

had seen at the inn on the Claine, and who had told me the news of Guise's death!

I uttered an exclamation of surprise on making this discovery, and my mother, freed suddenly, as it seemed, from the spell of fear, which had given her unnatural strength, sank back on the bed. Her grasp relaxed, and her breath came and went with so loud a rattle that I removed my gaze from him, and bent over her, full of concern and solicitude. Our eyes met. She tried to speak, and at last gasped, 'Not now, Gaston! Let him — let him ——'

Her lips framed the word 'go,' but she could not give it sound. I understood, however, and in impotent wrath I waved my hand to him to begone. When I looked up he had already obeyed me. He had seized the first opportunity to escape. The door was closed, the lamp burned steadily, and we were alone.

I gave her a little Armagnac, which stood beside the bed for such an occasion, and she revived, and presently opened her eyes. But I saw at once a great change in her. The look of fear had passed altogether from her face, and one of sorrow, yet content, had taken its place. She laid her hand in mine, and looked up at me, being too weak, as I thought, to speak. But by-and-by, when the strong spirit had done its work, she signed to me to lower my head to her mouth.

'The King of Navarre,' she murmured — 'you are sure, Gaston — he will retain you in your — employments?'

Her pleading eyes were so close to mine, I felt no scruples such as some might have felt, seeing her so near death; but I answered firmly and cheerfully, 'Madame, I am assured of it. There is no prince in Europe so trustworthy or so good to his servants.'

She sighed with infinite content, and blessed him in a feeble whisper. 'And if you live,' she went on, 'you will rebuild the old house, Gaston. The walls are sound yet. And the oak in the hall was not burned. There is a chest of linen at Gil's, and a chest with your father's gold lace — but that is pledged,' she added dreamily. 'I forgot.'

'Madame,' I answered solemnly, 'it shall be done — it shall be done as you wish, if the power lie with me.'

She lay for some time after that murmuring prayers, her head supported on my shoulder. I longed impatiently for the nurse to return, that I might despatch her for the leech; not that I thought anything could be done, but for my own comfort and greater satisfaction afterwards, and that my mother might not die without some fitting attendance. The house remained quiet, however, with that impressive quietness which sobers the heart at such times, and I could not do this. And about six o'clock my mother opened her eyes again.

'This is not Marsac,' she murmured abruptly, her eyes roving from the ceiling to the wall at the foot of the bed.

'No, Madame,' I answered, leaning over her, 'you are in Blois. But I am here—Gaston, your son.'

She looked at me, a faint smile of pleasure stealing over her pinched face. 'Twelve thousand livres a year,' she whispered, rather to herself than to me, 'and an establishment, reduced a little, yet creditable, very creditable.' For a moment she seemed to be dying in my arms, but again opened her eyes quickly and looked me in the face. 'Gaston?' she said, suddenly and strangely. 'Who said Gaston? He is with the King—I have blessed him; and his days shall be long in the land!' Then, raising herself in my arms with a last effort of strength, she cried loudly, 'Way there! Way for my son, the Sieur de Marsac!'

They were her last words. When I laid her down on the bed a moment later, she was dead, and I was alone.

Madame de Bonne, my mother, was seventy at the time of her death, having survived my father eighteen years. She was Marie de Roche de Loheac, third daughter of Raoul, Sieur de Loheac, on the Vilaine, and by her great-grandmother, a daughter of Jean de Laval, was descended from the ducal family of Rohan, a relationship which in after-times, and under greatly altered circumstances, Henry Duke of Rohan condescended to acknowledge, honouring

me with his friendship on more occasions than one. Her death, which I have here recorded, took place on the fourth of January, the Queen-Mother of France, Catherine de Medicis, dying a little after noon on the following day.

In Blois, as in every other town, even Paris itself, the Huguenots possessed at this time a powerful organisation; and with the aid of the surgeon, who showed me much respect in my bereavement, and exercised in my behalf all the influence which skilful and honest men of his craft invariably possess, I was able to arrange for my mother's burial in a private ground about a league beyond the walls and near the village of Chaverny. At the time of her death I had only thirty crowns in gold remaining, Simon Fleix, to whose fate I could obtain no clue, having carried off thirty-five with the horses. The whole of this residue, however, with the exception of a handsome gratuity to the nurse and a trifle spent on my clothes, I expended on the funeral, desiring that no stain should rest on my mother's birth or my affection. Accordingly, though the ceremony was of necessity private, and indeed secret, and the mourners were few, it lacked nothing, I think, of the decency and propriety which my mother loved; and which she preferred, I have often heard her say, to the vulgar show that is equally at the command of the noble and the farmer of taxes.

Until she was laid in her quiet resting-place I stood in constant fear of some interruption on the part either of Bruhl, whose connection with Fresnoy and the abduction I did not doubt, or of the Jacobin monk. But none came; and nothing happening to enlighten me as to the fate of Mademoiselle de la Vire, I saw my duty clear before me. I disposed of the furniture of my mother's room, and indeed of everything which was saleable, and raised in this way enough money to buy myself a new cloak—without which I could not travel in the wintry weather—and to hire a horse. Sorry as the animal was, the dealer required security, and I had none to offer. It was only at the last moment I bethought me of the fragment of gold chain which made-

moiselle had left behind her, and which, as well as my mother's rings and vinaigrette, I had kept back from the sale. This I was forced to lodge with him. Having thus, with some pain and more humiliation, provided means for the journey, I lost not an hour in beginning it. On the eighth of January I set out for Rosny, to carry the news of my ill-success and of mademoiselle's position whither I had looked a week before to carry herself.

CHAPTER XII.

MAXIMILIAN DE BETHUNE, BARON DE ROSNY.

I LOOKED to make the journey to Rosny in two days. But the heaviness of the roads and the sorry condition of my hackney hindered me so greatly that I lay the second night at Dreux, and, hearing the way was still worse between that place and my destination, began to think that I should be fortunate if I reached Rosny by the following noon. The country in this part seemed devoted to the League, the feeling increasing in violence as I approached the Seine. I heard nothing save abuse of the King of France and praise of the Guise princes, and had much ado, keeping a still tongue and riding modestly, to pass without molestation or inquiry.

Drawing near to Rosny, on the third morning, through a low marshy country covered with woods and alive with game of all kinds, I began to occupy myself with thoughts of the reception I was likely to encounter; which, I conjectured, would be none of the most pleasant. The daring and vigour of the Baron de Rosny, who had at this time the reputation of being in all parts of France at once, and the familiar terms on which he was known to live with the King of Navarre, gave me small reason to hope that he would listen with indulgence to such a tale as I had to tell

The nearer I came to the hour of telling it, indeed, the more improbable seemed some of its parts, and the more glaring my own carelessness in losing the token, and in letting mademoiselle out of my sight in such a place as Blois. I saw this so clearly now, and more clearly as the morning advanced, that I do not know that I ever anticipated anything with more fear than this explanation; which it yet seemed my duty to offer with all reasonable speed. The morning was warm, I remember; cloudy, yet not dark; the air near at hand full of moisture and very clear, with a circle of mist rising some way off, and filling the woods with blue distances. The road was deep and foundrous, and as I was obliged to leave it from time to time in order to pass the worst places, I presently began to fear that I had strayed into a by-road. After advancing some distance, in doubt whether I should persevere or turn back, I was glad to see before me a small house placed at the junction of several woodland paths. From the bush which hung over the door, and a water-trough which stood beside it, I judged the place to be an inn; and determining to get my horse fed before I went farther, I rode up to the door and rapped on it with my riding-switch.

The position of the house was so remote that I was surprised to see three or four heads thrust immediately out of a window. For a moment I thought I should have done better to have passed by; but the landlord coming out very civilly, and leading the way to a shed beside the house, I reflected that I had little to lose, and followed him. I found, as I expected, four horses tied up in the shed, the bits hanging round their necks and their girths loosed; while my surprise was not lessened by the arrival, before I had fastened up my own horse, of a sixth rider, who, seeing us by the shed, rode up to us, and saluted me as he dismounted.

He was a tall, strong man in the prime of youth, wearing a plain, almost mean suit of dust-coloured leather, and carrying no weapons except a hunting-knife, which hung in

a sheath at his girdle. He rode a powerful silver-roan horse, and was splashed to the top of his high untanned boots, as if he had come by the worst of paths, if by any.

He cast a shrewd glance at the landlord as he led his horse into the shed; and I judged from his brown complexion and quick eyes that he had seen much weather and lived an out-of-door life.

He watched me somewhat curiously while I mixed the fodder for my horse; and when I went into the house and sat down in the first room I came to, to eat a little bread-and-cheese which I had in my pouch, he joined me almost immediately. Apparently he could not stomach my poor fare, however, for after watching me for a time in silence, switching his boot with his whip the while, he called the landlord, and asked him, in a masterful way, what fresh meat he had, and particularly if he had any lean collops, or a fowl.

The fellow answered that there was nothing. His honour could have some Lisieux cheese, he added, or some stewed lentils.

'His honour does not want cheese,' the stranger answered peevishly, 'nor lentil porridge. And what is this I smell, my friend?' he continued, beginning suddenly to sniff with vigour. 'I swear I smell cooking.'

'It is the hind-quarter of a buck, which is cooking for the four gentlemen of the Robe; with a collop or two to follow,' the landlord explained; and humbly excused himself on the ground that the gentlemen had strictly engaged it for their own eating.

'What? A whole quarter! *and* a collop or two to follow!' the stranger retorted, smacking his lips. 'Who are they?'

'Two advocates and their clerks from the Parliament of Paris. They have been viewing a boundary near here, and are returning this afternoon,' the landlord answered.

'No reason why they should cause a famine!' ejaculated the stranger with energy. 'Go to them and say a gentleman, who has ridden far, and fasted since seven this morn-

ing, requests permission to sit at their table. A quarter of venison and a collop or two among four!' he continued, in a tone of extreme disgust. 'It is intolerable! And advocates! Why, at that rate, the King of France should eat a whole buck, and rise hungry! Don't you agree with me, sir?' he continued, turning on me and putting the question abruptly.

He was so comically and yet so seriously angry, and looked so closely at me as he spoke, that I hastened to say I agreed with him perfectly.

'Yet you eat cheese, sir!' he retorted irritably.

I saw that, not withstanding the simplicity of his dress, he was a gentleman, and so, forbearing to take offence, I told him plainly that my purse being light I travelled rather as I could than as I would.

'Is it so?' he answered hastily. 'Had I known that, I would have joined you in the cheese! After all, I would rather fast with a gentleman, than feast with a churl. But it is too late now. Seeing you mix the fodder, I thought your pockets were full.'

'The nag is tired, and has done its best,' I answered.

He looked at me curiously, and as though he would say móre. But the landlord returning at that moment, he turned to him instead.

'Well!' he said briskly. 'Is it all right?'

'I am sorry, your honour,' the man answered, reluctantly, and with a very downcast air, 'but the gentlemen beg to be excused.'

'Zounds!' cried my companion roundly. 'They do, do they?'

'They say they have no more, sir,' the landlord continued, faltering, 'than enough for themselves and a little dog they have with them.'

A shout of laughter which issued at that moment from the other room seemed to show that the quartette were making merry over my companion's request. I saw his cheek redden, and looked for an explosion of anger on his

part; but instead he stood a moment in thought in the middle of the floor, and then, much to the innkeeper's relief, pushed a stool towards me, and called for a bottle of the best wine. He pleasantly begged leave to eat a little of my cheese, which he said looked better than the Lisieux, and, filling my glass with wine, fell to as merrily as if he had never heard of the party in the other room.

I was more than a little surprised, I remember; for I had taken him to be a passionate man, and not one to sit down under an affront. Still I said nothing, and we conversed very well together. I noticed, however, that he stopped speaking more than once, as though to listen; but conceiving that he was merely reverting to the party in the other room, who grew each moment more uproarious, I said nothing, and was completely taken by surprise when he rose on a sudden, and, going to the open window, leaned out, shading his eyes with his hand.

'What is it?' I said, preparing to follow him.

He answered by a quiet chuckle. 'You shall see,' he added the next instant.

I rose, and going to the window looked out over his shoulder. Three men were approaching the inn on horseback. The first, a great burly, dark-complexioned man with fierce black eyes and a feathered cap, had pistols in his holsters and a short sword by his side. The other two, with the air of servants, were stout fellows, wearing green doublets and leather breeches. All three rode good horses, while a footman led two hounds after them in a leash. On seeing us they cantered forward, the leader waving his bonnet.

'Halt, there!' cried my companion, lifting up his voice when they were within a stone's throw of us. 'Maignan!'

'My lord?' answered he of the feather, pulling up on the instant.

'You will find six horses in the shed there,' the stranger cried in a voice of command. 'Turn out the four to the left as you go in. Give each a cut, and send it about its business!'

The man wheeled his horse before the words were well uttered, and crying obsequiously 'that it was done,' flung his reins to one of the other riders and disappeared in the shed, as if the order given him were the most commonplace one in the world.

The party in the other room, however, by whom all could be heard, were not slow to take the alarm. They broke into a shout of remonstrance, and one of their number, leaping from the window, asked with a very fierce air what the devil we meant. The others thrust out their faces, swollen and flushed with the wine they had drunk, and with many oaths backed up his question. Not feeling myself called upon to interfere, I prepared to see something diverting.

My companion, whose coolness surprised me, had all the air of being as little concerned as myself. He even persisted for a time in ignoring the angry lawyer, and, turning a deaf ear to all the threats and abuse with which the others assailed him, continued to look calmly at the prospect. Seeing this, and that nothing could move him, the man who had jumped through the window, and who seemed the most enterprising of the party, left us at last and ran towards the stalls. The aspect of the two serving-men, however, who rode up grinning, and made as if they would ride him down, determined him to return; which he did, pale with fury, as the last of the four horses clattered out, and after a puzzled look round trotted off at its leisure into the forest.

On this, the man grew more violent, as I have remarked frightened men do; so that at last the stranger condescended to notice him. 'My good sir,' he said coolly, looking at him through the window as if he had not seen him before, 'you annoy me. What is the matter?'

The fellow retorted with a vast amount of bluster, asking what the devil we meant by turning out his horses.

'Only to give you and the gentlemen with you a little exercise,' my companion answered, with grim humour, and in a

severe tone strange in one so young—'than which nothing is more wholesome after a full meal. That, and a lesson in good manners. Maignan,' he continued, raising his voice, 'if this person has anything more to say, answer him. He is nearer your degree than mine.'

And leaving the man to slink away like a whipped dog—for the mean are ever the first to cringe—my friend turned from the window. Meeting my eyes as he went back to his seat, he laughed. 'Well,' he said, 'what do you think?'

'That the ass in the lion's skin is very well till it meets the lion,' I answered.

He laughed again, and seemed pleased, as I doubt not he was. 'Pooh, pooh!' he said. 'It passed the time, and I think I am quits with my gentlemen now. But I must be riding. Possibly our roads may lie for a while in the same direction, sir?' And he looked at me irresolutely.

I answered cautiously that I was going to the town of Rosny.

'You are not from Paris?' he continued, still looking at me.

'No,' I answered. 'I am from the south.'

'From Blois, perhaps?'

I nodded.

'Ah!' he said, making no comment, which somewhat surprised me, all men at this time desiring news, and looking to Blois for it. 'I am riding towards Rosny also. Let us be going.'

But I noticed that as we got to horse, the man he called Maignan holding his stirrup with much formality, he turned and looked at me more than once with an expression in his eye which I could not interpret; so that, being in an enemy's country, where curiosity was a thing to be deprecated, I began to feel somewhat uneasy. However, as he presently gave way to a fit of laughter, and seemed to be digesting his late diversion at the inn, I thought no more of it, finding him excellent company and a man of surprising information.

Notwithstanding this my spirits began to flag as I approached Rosny; and as on such occasions nothing is more trying than the well-meant rallying of a companion ignorant of our trouble, I felt rather relief than regret when he drew rein at four cross-roads a mile or so short of the town, and, announcing that here our paths separated, took a civil leave of me, and went his way with his servants.

I dismounted at an inn at the extremity of the town, and, stopping only to arrange my dress and drink a cup of wine, asked the way to the Château, which was situate, I learned, no more than a third of a mile away. I went thither on foot by way of an avenue of trees leading up to a drawbridge and gateway. The former was down, but the gates were closed, and all the formalities of a fortress in time of war were observed on my admission, though the garrison appeared to consist only of two or three serving-men and as many foresters. I had leisure after sending in my name to observe that the house was old and partly ruinous, but of great strength, covered in places with ivy, and closely surrounded by woods. A staid-looking page came presently to me, and led me up a narrow staircase to a parlour lighted by two windows, looking, one into the courtyard, the other towards the town. Here a tall man was waiting to receive me, who rose on my entrance and came forward. Judge of my surprise when I recognised my acquaintance of the afternoon! 'M. de Rosny?' I exclaimed, standing still and looking at him in confusion.

'The same, sir,' he answered, with a quiet smile. 'You come from the King of Navarre, I believe, and on an errand to me. You may speak openly. The king has no secrets from me.'

There was something in the gravity of his demeanour as he waited for me to speak which strongly impressed me; notwithstanding that he was ten years younger than myself, and I had seen him so lately in a lighter mood. I felt that his reputation had not belied him—that here was a great man; and reflecting with despair on the inadequacy

of the tale I had to tell him, I paused to consider in what terms I should begin. He soon put an end to this, however. 'Come, sir,' he said with impatience. 'I have told you that you may speak out. You should have been here four days ago, as I take it. Now you are here, where is the lady?'

'Mademoiselle de la Vire?' I stammered, rather to gain time than with any other object.

'Tut, tut!' he rejoined, frowning. 'Is there any other lady in the question? Come, sir, speak out. Where have you left her? This is no affair of gallantry,' he continued, the harshness of his demeanour disagreeably surprising me, 'that you need beat about the bush. The king entrusted to you a lady, who, I have no hesitation in telling you now, was in possession of certain State secrets. It is known that she escaped safely from Chizé and arrived safely at Blois. Where is she?'

'I would to Heaven I knew, sir!' I exclaimed in despair, feeling the painfulness of my position increased a hundredfold by his manner. 'I wish to God I did.'

'What is this?' he cried in a raised voice. 'You do not know where she is? You jest, M. de Marsac.'

'It were a sorry jest,' I answered, summoning up a rueful smile. And on that, plunging desperately into the story which I have here set down, I narrated the difficulties under which I had raised my escort, the manner in which I came to be robbed of the gold token, how mademoiselle was trepanned, the lucky chance by which I found her again, and the final disappointment. He listened, but listened throughout with no word of sympathy—rather with impatience, which grew at last into derisive incredulity. When I had done he asked me bluntly what I called myself.

Scarcely understanding what he meant, I repeated my name.

He answered, rudely and flatly, that it was impossible. 'I do not believe it, sir!' he repeated, his brow dark. 'You are not the man. You bring neither the lady nor the token, nor anything else by which I can test your story. Nay.

sir, do not scowl at me,' he continued sharply. 'I am the mouthpiece of the King of Navarre, to whom this matter is of the highest importance. I cannot believe that the man whom he would choose would act so. This house you prate of in Blois, for instance, and the room with the two doors? What were you doing while mademoiselle was being removed?'

'I was engaged with the men of the house,' I answered, striving to swallow the anger which all but choked me. 'I did what I could. Had the door given way, all would have been well.'

He looked at me darkly. 'That is fine talking!' he said with a sneer. Then he dropped his eyes and seemed for a time to fall into a brown study, while I stood before him, confounded by this new view of the case, furious, yet not knowing how to vent my fury, cut to the heart by his insults, yet without hope or prospect of redress.

'Come!' he said harshly, after two or three minutes of gloomy reflection on his part and burning humiliation on mine, 'is there anyone here who can identify you, or in any other way confirm your story, sir? Until I know how the matter stands I can do nothing.'

I shook my head in sullen shame. I might protest against his brutality and this judgment of me, but to what purpose while he sheltered himself behind his master?

'Stay!' he said presently, with an abrupt gesture of remembrance. 'I had nearly forgotten. I have some here who have been lately at the King of Navarre's Court at St. Jean d'Angely. If you still maintain that you are the M. de Marsac to whom this commission was entrusted, you will doubtless have no objection to seeing them?'

On this I felt myself placed in a most cruel dilemma. If I refused to submit my case to the proposed ordeal, I stood an impostor confessed. If I consented to see these strangers, it was probable they would not recognise me, and possible that they might deny me in terms calculated to make my position even worse, if that might be. I hesitated; but,

Rosny standing inexorable before me awaiting an answer, I finally consented.

'Good!' he said curtly. 'This way, if you please. They are here. The latch is tricky. Nay, sir, it is my house.'

Obeying the stern motion of his hand, I passed before him into the next room, feeling myself more humiliated than I can tell by this reference to strangers. For a moment I could see no one. The day was waning, the room I entered was long and narrow, and illuminated only by a glowing fire. Besides I was myself, perhaps, in some embarrassment. I believed that my conductor had made a mistake, or that his guests had departed, and I turned towards him to ask for an explanation. He merely pointed onwards, however, and I advanced; whereupon a young and handsome lady, who had been seated in the shadow of the great fireplace, rose suddenly, as if startled, and stood looking at me, the glow of the burning wood falling on one side of her face and turning her hair to gold.

'Well!' M. de Rosny said, in a voice which sounded a little odd in my ears. 'You do not know madame, I think?'

I saw that she was a complete stranger to me, and bowed to her without speaking. The lady saluted me in turn ceremoniously and in silence.

'Is there no one else here who should know you?' M. de Rosny continued, in a tone almost of persiflage, and with the same change in his voice which had struck me before; but now it was more marked. 'If not, M. de Marsac, I am afraid—— But first look round, look round, sir; I would not judge any man hastily.'

He laid his hand on my shoulder as he finished in a manner so familiar and so utterly at variance with his former bearing that I doubted if I heard or felt aright. Yet I looked mechanically at the lady, and seeing that her eyes glistened in the firelight, and that she gazed at me very kindly, I wondered still more; falling, indeed, into a very confusion of amazement. This was not lessened but

augmented a hundredfold when, turning in obedience to the pressure of de Rosny's hand, I saw beside me, as if she had risen from the floor, another lady—no other than Mademoiselle de la Vire herself! She had that moment stepped out of the shadow of the great fireplace, which had hitherto hidden her, and stood before me curtseying prettily, with the same look on her face and in her eyes which madame's wore.

'Mademoiselle!' I muttered, unable to take my eyes from her.

'Mais oui, monsieur, mademoiselle,' she answered, curtseying lower, with the air of a child rather than a woman.

'Here?' I stammered, my mouth open, my eyes staring.

'Here, sir—thanks to the valour of a brave man,' she answered, speaking in a voice so low I scarcely heard her. And then, dropping her eyes, she stepped back into the shadow, as if either she had said too much already, or doubted her composure were she to say more. She was so radiantly dressed, she looked in the firelight more like a fairy than a woman, being of small and delicate proportions; and she seemed in my eyes so different a person, particularly in respect of the softened expression of her features, from the Mademoiselle de la Vire whom I had known and seen plunged in sloughs and bent to the saddle with fatigue, that I doubted still if I had seen aright, and was as far from enlightenment as before.

It was M. de Rosny himself who relieved me from the embarrassment I was suffering. He embraced me in the most kind and obliging manner, and this more than once; begging me to pardon the deception he had practised upon me, and to which he had been impelled partly by the odd nature of our introduction at the inn, and partly by his desire to enhance the joyful surprise he had in store for me. 'Come,' he said presently, drawing me to the window, 'let me show you some more of your old friends.'

I looked out, and saw below me in the courtyard my three horses drawn up in a row, the Cid being bestridden by

Simon Fleix, who, seeing me, waved a triumphant greeting. A groom stood at the head of each horse, and on either side was a man with a torch. My companion laughed gleefully. 'It was Maignan's arrangement,' he said. 'He has a quaint taste in such things.'

After greeting Simon Fleix a hundred times, I turned back into the room, and, my heart overflowing with gratitude and wonder, I begged M. de Rosny to acquaint me with the details of mademoiselle's escape.

'It was the most simple thing in the world,' he said, taking me by the hand and leading me back to the hearth. 'While you were engaged with the rascals, the old woman who daily brought mademoiselle's food grew alarmed at the uproar, and came into the room to learn what it was. Mademoiselle, unable to help you, and uncertain of your success, thought the opportunity too good to be lost. She forced the old woman to show her and her maid the way out through the garden. This done, they ran down a lane, as I understand, and came immediately upon the lad with the horses, who recognised them and helped them to mount. They waited some minutes for you, and then rode off.'

'But I inquired at the gate,' I said.

'At which gate?' inquired M. de Rosny, smiling.

'The North-gate, of course,' I answered.

'Just so,' he rejoined with a nod. 'But they went out through the West-gate and made a circuit. He is a strange lad, that of yours below there. He has a head on his shoulder, M. de Marsac. Well, two leagues outside the town they halted, scarcely knowing how to proceed. By good fortune, however, a horse-dealer of my acquaintance was at the inn. He knew Mademoiselle de la Vire, and, hearing whither she was bound, brought her hither without let or hindrance.'

'Was he a Norman?' I asked.

M. de Rosny nodded, smiling at me shrewdly. 'Yes,' he said, 'he told me much about you. And now let me introduce you to my wife, Madame de Rosny.'

He led me up to the lady who had risen at my entrance, and who now welcomed me as kindly as she had before looked on me, paying me many pleasant compliments. I gazed at her with interest, having heard much of her beauty and of the strange manner in which M. de Rosny, being enamoured of two young ladies, and chancing upon both while lodging in different apartments at an inn, had decided which he should visit and make his wife. He appeared to read what was in my mind, for as I bowed before her, thanking her for the obliging things which she had uttered, and which for ever bound me to her service, he gaily pinched her ear, and said, 'When you want a good wife, M. de Marsac, be sure you turn to the right.'

He spoke in jest, and having his own case only in his mind. But I, looking mechanically in the direction he indicated, saw mademoiselle standing a pace or two to my right in the shadow of the great chimney-piece. I know not whether she frowned more or blushed more; but this for certain, that she answered my look with one of sharp displeasure, and, turning her back on me, swept quickly from the room, with no trace in her bearing of that late tenderness and gratitude which I had remarked.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT ROSNY.

THE morning brought only fresh proofs of the kindness which M. de Rosny had conceived for me. Awaking early I found on a stool beside my clothes, a purse of gold containing a hundred crowns; and a youth presently entering to ask me if I lacked anything, I had at first some difficulty in recognising Simon Fleix, so sprucely was the lad dressed, in a mode resembling Maignan's. I looked at the student more than once before I addressed him by his name; and

was as much surprised by the strange change I observed in him—for it was not confined to his clothes—as by anything which had happened since I entered the house. I rubbed my eyes, and asked him what he had done with his soutane.

'Burned it, M. de Marsac,' he answered briefly.

I saw that he had burned much, metaphorically speaking, besides his soutane. He was less pale, less lank, less wo-begone than formerly, and went more briskly. He had lost the air of crack-brained disorder which had distinguished him, and was smart, sedate, and stooped less. Only the odd sparkle remained in his eyes, and bore witness to the same nervous, eager spirit within.

'What are you going to do, then, Simon?' I asked, noting these changes curiously.

'I am a soldier,' he answered, 'and follow M. de Marsac.'

I laughed. 'You have chosen a poor service, I am afraid,' I said, beginning to rise; 'and one, too, Simon, in which it is possible you may be killed. I thought that would not suit you,' I continued, to see what he would say. But he answered nothing, and I looked at him in great surprise. 'You have made up your mind, then, at last?' I said.

'Perfectly,' he answered.

'And solved all your doubts?'

'I have no doubts.'

'You are a Huguenot?'

'That is the only true and pure religion,' he replied gravely. And with apparent sincerity and devotion he repeated Beza's Confession of Faith.

This filled me with profound astonishment, but I said no more at the time, though I had my doubts. I waited until I was alone with M. de Rosny, and then I unbosomed myself on the matter; expressing my surprise at the suddenness of the conversion, and at such a man, as I had found the student to be, stating his views so firmly and steadfastly, and with so little excitement. Observing that M. de Rosny smiled but answered nothing, I explained myself farther.

'I am surprised,' I said, 'because I have always heard it maintained that clerkly men, becoming lost in the mazes of theology, seldom find any sure footing; that not one in a hundred returns to his old faith, or finds grace to accept a new one. I am speaking only of such, of course, as I believe this lad to be—eager, excitable brains, learning much, and without judgment to digest what they learn.'

'Of such I also believe it to be true,' M. de Rosny answered, still smiling. 'But even on them a little influence, applied at the right moment, has much effect, M. de Marsac.'

'I allow that,' I said. 'But my mother, of whom I have spoken to you, saw much of this youth. His fidelity to her was beyond praise. Yet her faith, though grounded on a rock, had no weight with him.'

M. de Rosny shook his head, still smiling.

'It is not our mothers who convert us,' he said.

'What!' I cried, my eyes opened. 'Do you mean—do you mean that Mademoiselle has done this?'

'I fancy so,' he answered, nodding. 'I think my lady cast her spell over him by the way. The lad left Blois with her, if what you say be true, without faith in the world. He came to my hands two days later the stoutest of Huguenots. It is not hard to read this riddle.'

'Such conversions are seldom lasting,' I said.

He looked at me queerly; and, the smile still hovering about his lips, answered 'Tush, man! Why so serious? Theodore Beza himself could not look dryer. The lad is in earnest, and there is no harm done.'

And, Heaven knows, I was in no mood to suspect harm; nor inclined just then to look at the dark side of things. It may be conceived how delightful it was to me to be received as an equal and honoured guest by a man, even then famous, and now so grown in reputation as to overshadow all Frenchmen save his master; how pleasant to enjoy the comforts and amiabilities of home, from which I had been long estranged; to pour my mother's story into Madame's

ears and find comfort in her sympathy; to feel myself, in fine, once more a gentleman with an acknowledged place in the world. Our days we spent in hunting, or excursions of some kind, our evenings in long conversations, which impressed me with an ever-growing respect for my lord's powers.

For there seemed to be no end either to his knowledge of France, or to the plans for its development, which even then filled his brain, and have since turned wildernesses into fruitful lands, and squalid towns into great cities. Grave and formal, he could yet unbend; the most sagacious of counsellors, he was a soldier also, and loved the seclusion in which we lived the more that it was not devoid of danger; the neighbouring towns being devoted to the League, and the general disorder alone making it possible for him to lie unsuspected in his own house.

One thing only rendered my ease and comfort imperfect, and that was the attitude which Mademoiselle de la Vire assumed towards me. Of her gratitude in the first blush of the thing I felt no doubt, for not only had she thanked me very prettily, though with reserve, on the evening of my arrival, but the warmth of M. de Rosny's kindness left me no choice, save to believe that she had given him an exaggerated idea of my merits and services. I asked no more than this. Such good offices left me nothing to expect or desire; my age and ill-fortune placing me at so great a disadvantage that, far from dreaming of friendship or intimacy with her, I did not even assume the equality in our daily intercourse to which my birth, taken by itself, entitled me. Knowing that I must appear in her eyes old, poor, and ill-dressed, and satisfied with having asserted my conduct and honour, I was careful not to trespass on her gratitude; and while forward in such courtesies as could not weary her, I avoided with equal care every appearance of pursuing her, or inflicting my company upon her. I addressed her formally and upon formal topics only, such, I mean, as we shared with the rest of our company; and reminded myself often that though we now met in the same

house and at the same table, she was still the Mademoiselle de la Vire who had borne herself so loftily in the King of Navarre's ante-chamber. This I did, not out of pique or wounded pride, which I no more, God knows, harboured against her than against a bird; but that I might not in my new prosperity forget the light in which such a woman, young, spoiled, and beautiful, must still regard me.

Keeping to this inoffensive posture, I was the more hurt when I found her gratitude fade with the hour. After the first two days, during which I remarked that she was very silent, seldom speaking to me or looking at me, she resumed much of her old air of disdain. For that I cared little; but she presently went farther, and began to rake up the incidents which had happened at St. Jean d'Angely, and in which I had taken part. She continually adverted to my poverty while there, to the odd figure I had cut, and the many jests her friends had made at my expense. She seemed to take a pleasure positively savage in these, gibing at me sometimes so bitterly as to shame and pain me, and bring the colour to Madame de Rosny's cheeks.

To the time we had spent together, on the other hand, she never or rarely referred. One afternoon, however, a week after my arrival at Rosny, I found her sitting alone in the parlour. I had not known she was there, and I was for withdrawing at once with a bow and a muttered apology. But she stopped me with an angry gesture. 'I do not bite,' she said, rising from her stool and meeting my eyes, a red spot in each cheek. 'Why do you look at me like that? Do you know, M. de Marsac, that I have no patience with you.' And she stamped her foot on the floor.

'But, mademoiselle,' I stammered humbly, wondering what in the world she meant, 'what have I done?'

'Done?' she repeated angrily. 'Done? It is not what you have done, it is what you are. I have no patience with you. Why are you so dull, sir? Why are you so dowdy? Why do you go about with your doublet awry,

and your hair lank? Why do you speak to Maignan as if he were a gentleman? Why do you look always solemn and polite, and as if all the world were a prêche? Why? Why? Why, I say?'

She stopped from sheer lack of breath, leaving me as much astonished as ever in my life. She looked so beautiful in her fury and fierceness too, that I could only stare at her and wonder dumbly what it all meant.

'Well!' she cried impatiently, after bearing this as long as she could, 'have you not a word to say for yourself? Have you no tongue? Have you no will of your own at all, M. de Marsac?'

'But, mademoiselle,' I began, trying to explain.

'Chut!' she exclaimed, cutting me short before I could get farther, as the way of women is. And then she added, in a changed tone, and very abruptly, 'You have a velvet knot of mine, sir. Give it me.'

'It is in my room,' I answered, astonished beyond measure at this sudden change of subject, and equally sudden demand.

'Then fetch it, sir, if you please,' she replied, her eyes flashing afresh. 'Fetch it. Fetch it, I say! It has served its turn, and I prefer to have it. Who knows but that some day you may be showing it for a love-knot?'

'Mademoiselle!' I cried, hotly. And I think that for the moment I was as angry as she was.

'Still, I prefer to have it,' she answered sullenly, casting down her eyes.

I was so much enraged, I went without a word and fetched it, and, bringing it to her where she stood, in the same place, put it into her hands. When she saw it some recollection, I fancy, of the day when she had traced the cry for help on it, came to her in her anger; for she took it from me with all her bearing altered. She trembled, and held it for a moment in her hands, as if she did not know what to do with it. She was thinking, doubtless, of the house in Blois and the peril she had run there; and,

being for my part quite willing that she should think and feel how badly she had acted, I stood looking at her, sparing her no whit of my glance.

'The gold chain you left on my mother's pillow,' I said coldly, seeing she continued silent, 'I cannot return to you at once, for I have pledged it. But I will do so as soon as I can.'

'You have pledged it?' she muttered, with her eyes averted.

'Yes, mademoiselle, to procure a horse to bring me here,' I replied drily. 'However, it shall be redeemed. In return, there is something I too would ask.'

'What?' she murmured, recovering herself with an effort, and looking at me with something of her old pride and defiance.

'The broken coin you have,' I said. 'The token, I mean. It is of no use to you, for your enemies hold the other half. It might be of service to me.'

'How?' she asked curtly.

'Because some day I may find its fellow, mademoiselle.'

'And then?' she cried. She looked at me, her lips parted, her eyes flashing. 'What then, when you have found its fellow, M. de Marsac?'

I shrugged my shoulders.

'Bah!' she exclaimed, clenching her little hand, and stamping her foot on the floor in a passion I could not understand. 'That is you! That is M. de Marsac all over. You say nothing, and men think nothing of you. You go with your hat in your hand, and they tread on you. They speak, and you are silent! Why, if I could use a sword as you can, I would keep silence before no man, nor let any man save the King of France cock his hat in my presence! But you! There! go, leave me. Here is your coin. Take it and go. Send me that lad of yours to keep me awake. At any rate he has brains, he is young, he is a man, he has a soul, he can feel—if he were anything but a clerk.'

She waved me off in such a wind of passion as might have amused me in another, but in her smacked so strongly

of ingratitude as to pain me not a little. I went, however, and sent Simon to her; though I liked the errand very ill, and no better when I saw the lad's face light up at the mention of her name. But apparently she had not recovered her temper when he reached her, for he fared no better than I had done; coming away presently with the air of a whipped dog, as I saw from the yew-tree walk where I was strolling.

Still, after that she made it a habit to talk to him more and more; and, Monsieur and Madame de Rosny being much taken up with one another, there was no one to check her fancy or speak a word of advice. Knowing her pride, I had no fears for her; but it grieved me to think that the lad's head should be turned. A dozen times I made up my mind to speak to her on his behalf; but for one thing it was not my business, and for another I soon discovered that she was aware of my displeasure, and valued it not a jot. For venturing one morning, when she was in a pleasant humour, to hint that she treated those beneath her too inhumanly, and with an unkindness as little becoming noble blood as familiarity, she asked me scornfully if I did not think she treated Simon Fleix well enough. To which I had nothing to answer.

I might here remark on the system of secret intelligence by means of which M. de Rosny, even in this remote place, received news of all that was passing in France. But it is common fame. There was no coming or going of messengers, which would quickly have aroused suspicion in the neighbouring town, nor was it possible even for me to say exactly by what channels news came. But come it did, and at all hours of the day. In this way we heard of the danger of La Ganache and of the effort contemplated by the King of Navarre for its relief. M. de Rosny not only communicated these matters to me without reserve, but engaged my affections by farther proofs of confidence such as might well have flattered a man of greater importance.

I have said that, as a rule, there was no coming or going of messengers. But one evening, returning from the chase

with one of the keepers, who had prayed my assistance in hunting down a crippled doe, I was surprised to find a strange horse, which had evidently been ridden hard and far, standing smoking in the yard. Inquiring whose it was, I learned that a man believed by the grooms to be from Blois had just arrived and was closeted with the baron. An event so far out of the ordinary course of things naturally aroused my wonder; but desiring to avoid any appearance of curiosity, which, if indulged, is apt to become the most vulgar of vices, I refrained from entering the house, and repaired instead to the yew-walk. I had scarcely, however, heated my blood, a little chilled with riding, before the page came to me to fetch me to his master.

I found M. de Rosny striding up and down his room, his manner so disordered and his face disfigured by so much grief and horror that I started on seeing him. My heart sinking in a moment, I did not need to look at Madame, who sat weeping silently in a chair, to assure myself that something dreadful had happened. The light was failing, and a lamp had been brought into the room. M. de Rosny pointed abruptly to a small piece of paper which lay on the table beside it, and, obeying his gesture, I took this up and read its contents, which consisted of less than a score of words.

'He is ill and like to die,' the message ran, 'twenty leagues south of La Ganache. Come at all costs. P. M.'

'Who?' I said stupidly—stupidly, for already I began to understand. 'Who is ill and like to die?'

M. de Rosny turned to me, and I saw that the tears were trickling unbidden down his cheeks. 'There is but one *he* for me,' he cried. 'May God spare that one! May He spare him to France, which needs him, to the Church, which hangs on him, and to me, who love him! Let him not fall in the hour of fruition. O Lord, let him not fall!' And he sank on to a stool, and remained in that posture with his face in his hands, his broad shoulders shaken with grief

'Come, sir,' I said, after a pause sacred to sorrow and dismay; 'let me remind you that while there is life there is hope.'

'Hope?'

'Yes, M. de Rosny, hope,' I replied more cheerfully. He has work to do. He is elected, called, and chosen; the Joshua of his people, as M. d'Amours rightly called him. God will not take him yet. You shall see him and be embraced by him, as has happened a hundred times. Remember, sir. the King of Navarre is strong, hardy, and young, and no doubt in good hands.'

'Mornay's,' M. de Rosny cried, looking up with contempt in his eye.

Yet from that moment he rallied, spurred, I think, by the thought that the King of Navarre's recovery depended under God on M. de Mornay; whom he was ever inclined to regard as his rival. He began to make instant preparations for departure from Rosny, and bade me do so also, telling me, somewhat curtly and without explanation, that he had need of me. The danger of so speedy a return to the South, where the full weight of the Vicomte de Turenne's vengeance awaited me, occurred to me strongly; and I ventured, though with a little shame, to mention it. But M. de Rosny, after gazing at me a moment in apparent doubt, put the objection aside with a degree of peevishness unusual in him, and continued to press on his arrangements as earnestly as though they did not include separation from a wife equally loving and beloved.

Having few things to look to myself, I was at leisure, when the hour of departure came, to observe both the courage with which Madame de Rosny supported her sorrow, 'for the sake of France,' and the unwonted tenderness which Mademoiselle de la Vire, lifted for once above herself, lavished on her. I seemed to stand—happily in one light, and yet the feeling was fraught with pain—outside their familiar relations; yet, having made my adieux as short and formal as possible, that I might not encroach on other

and more sacred ones, I found at the last moment something in waiting for me. I was surprised as I rode under the gateway a little ahead of the others, by something small and light falling on the saddle-bow before me. Catching it before it could slide to the ground, I saw, with infinite astonishment, that I held in my hand a tiny velvet bow.

To look up at the window of the parlour, which I have said was over the archway, was my first impulse. I did so, and met mademoiselle's eyes for a second, and a second only. The next moment she was gone. M. de Rosny clattered through the gate at my heels, the servants behind him. And we were on the road.

CHAPTER XIV.

M. DE RAMBOUILLET.

For a while we were but a melancholy party. The incident I have last related—which seemed to admit of more explanations than one—left me in a state of the greatest perplexity; and this prevailed with me for a time, and was only dissipated at length by my seeing my own face, as it were, in a glass. For, chancing presently to look behind me, I observed that Simon Fleix was riding, notwithstanding his fine hat and feather and his new sword, in a posture and with an air of dejection difficult to exaggerate; whereon the reflection that master and man had the same object in their minds—nay, the thought that possibly he bore in his bosom a like token to that which lay warm in mine—occurring to me, I roused myself as from some degrading dream, and, shaking up the Cid, cantered forward to join Rosny, who, in no cheerful mood himself, was riding steadily forward, wrapped to his eyes in his cloak.

The news of the King of Navarre's illness had fallen on him, indeed, in the midst of his sanguine scheming with

the force of a thunderbolt. He saw himself in danger of losing at once the master he loved and the brilliant future to which he looked forward; and amid the imminent crash of his hopes and the destruction of the system in which he lived, he had scarcely time to regret the wife he was leaving at Rosny or the quiet from which he was so suddenly called. His heart was in the South, at La Ganache, by Henry's couch. His main idea was to get there quickly at all risks. The name of the King of Navarre's physician was constantly on his lips. 'Dortoman is a good man. If anyone can save him, Dortoman will,' was his perpetual cry. And whenever he met anyone who had the least appearance of bearing news, he would have me stop and interrogate him, and by no means let the traveller go until he had given us the last rumour from Blois—the channel through which all the news from the South reached us.

An incident which occurred at the inn that evening cheered him somewhat; the most powerful minds being prone, I have observed, to snatch at omens in times of uncertainty. An elderly man, of strange appearance, and dressed in an affected and bizarre fashion, was seated at table when we arrived. Though I entered first in my assumed capacity of leader of the party, he let me pass before him without comment, but rose and solemnly saluted M. de Rosny, albeit the latter walked behind me and was much more plainly dressed. Rosny returned his greeting and would have passed on; but the stranger, interposing with a still lower bow, invited him to take his seat, which was near the fire and sheltered from the draught, at the same time making as if he would himself remove to another place.

'Nay,' said my companion, surprised by such an excess of courtesy, 'I do not see why I should take your place, sir.'

'Not mine only,' the old man rejoined, looking at him with a particularity and speaking with an emphasis which attracted our attention, 'but those of many others, who I

can assure you will very shortly yield them up to you, whether they will or not.'

M. de Rosny shrugged his shoulders and passed on, affecting to suppose the old man wandered. But privately he thought much of his words, and more when he learned that he was an astrologer from Paris, who had the name, at any rate in this country, of having studied under Nostradamus. And whether he drew fresh hopes from this, or turned his attention more particularly as we approached Blois to present matters, certainly he grew more cheerful, and began again to discuss the future, as though assured of his master's recovery.

'You have never been to the King's Court?' he said presently, following up, as I judged, a train of thought in his own mind. 'At Blois, I mean.'

'No; nor do I feel anxious to visit it,' I answered. 'To tell you the truth, M. le Baron,' I continued with some warmth, 'the sooner we are beyond Blois, the better I shall be pleased. I think we run some risk there, and, besides, I do not fancy a shambles. I do not think I could see the king without thinking of the Bartholomew, nor his chamber without thinking of Guise.'

'Tut, tut!' he said, 'you have killed a man before now.'

'Many,' I answered.

'Do they trouble you?'

'No, but they were killed in fair fight,' I replied. 'That makes a difference.'

'To you,' he said drily. 'But you are not the King of France, you see. Should you ever come acros him, he continued, flicking his horse's ears, a faint smile on his lips, 'I will give you a hint. Talk to him of the battles at Jarnac and Moncontour, and praise your Condé's father! As Condé lost the fight and he won it, the compliment comes home to him. The more hopelessly a man has lost his powers, my friend, the more fondly he regards them, and the more highly he prizes the victories he can no longer gain.'

'Ugh!' I muttered.

'Of the two parties at Court,' Rosny continued, calmly overlooking my ill-humour, 'trust D'Aumont and Biron and the French clique. They are true to France at any rate. But whomsoever you see consort with the two Retzs —the King of Spain's jackals as men name them—avoid him for a Spaniard and a traitor.'

'But the Retzs are Italians,' I objected peevishly.

'The same thing,' he answered curtly. 'They cry, "Vive le Roi!" but privately they are for the League, or for Spain, or for whatever may most hurt us; who are better Frenchmen than themselves, and whose leader will some day, if God spare his life, be King of France.'

'Well, the less I have to do with the one or the other of them, save at the sword's point, the better I shall be pleased,' I rejoined.

On that he looked at me with a queer smile; as was his way when he had more in his mind than appeared. And this, and something special in the tone of his conversation, as well, perhaps, as my own doubts about my future and his intentions regarding me, gave me an uneasy feeling; which lasted through the day, and left me only when more immediate peril presently rose to threaten us.

It happened in this way. We had reached the outskirts of Blois, and were just approaching the gate, hoping to pass through it without attracting attention, when two travellers rode slowly out of a lane, the mouth of which we were passing. They eyed us closely as they reined in to let us go by; and M. de Rosny, who was riding with his horse's head at my stirrup, whispered me to press on. Before I could comply, however, the strangers cantered by us, and turning in the saddle when abreast of us looked us in the face. A moment later one of them cried loudly, 'It is he!' and both pulled their horses across the road, and waited for us to come up.

Aware that if M. de Rosny were discovered he would be happy if he escaped with imprisonment, the king being too jealous of his Catholic reputation to venture to protect a

Huguenot, however illustrious, I saw that the situation was desperate; for, though we were five to two, the neighbourhood of the city—the gate being scarcely a bow-shot off—rendered flight or resistance equally hopeless. I could think of nothing for it save to put a bold face on the matter, and, M. de Rosny doing the same, we advanced in the most innocent way possible.

'Halt, there!' cried one of the strangers sharply. 'And let me tell you, sir, you are known.'

'What if I am?' I answered impatiently, still pressing on. 'Are you highwaymen, that you stop the way?'

The speaker on the other side looked at me keenly, but in a moment retorted, 'Enough trifling, sir! Who *you* are I do not know. But the person riding at your rein is M. de Rosny. Him I do know, and I warn him to stop.'

I thought the game was lost, but to my surprise my companion answered at once and almost in the same words I had used. 'Well, sir, and what of that?' he said.

'What of that?' the stranger exclaimed, spurring his horse so as still to bar the way. 'Why, only this, that you must be a madman to show yourself on this side of the Loire.'

'It is long since I have seen the other,' was my companion's unmoved answer.

'You are M. de Rosny? You do not deny it?' the man cried in astonishment.

'Certainly I do not deny it,' M. de Rosny answered bluntly. 'And more, the day has been, sir,' he continued with sudden fire, 'when few at his Majesty's Court would have dared to chop words with Solomon de Bethune, much less to stop him on the highway within a mile of the palace. But times are changed with me, sir, and it would seem with others also, if true men rallying to his Majesty in his need are to be challenged by every passer on the road.'

'What! Are you Solomon de Bethune?' the man cried incredulously. Incredulously, but his countenance fell, and his voice was full of chagrin and disappointment.

'Who else, sir?' M. de Rosny replied haughtily. 'I am, and, as far as I know, I have as much right on this side of the Loire as any other man.'

'A thousand pardons.'

'If you are not satisfied——'

'Nay, M. de Rosny, I am perfectly satisfied.'

The stranger repeated this with a very crestfallen air, adding, 'A thousand pardons'; and fell to making other apologies, doffing his hat with great respect. 'I took you, if you will pardon me saying so, for your Huguenot brother, M. Maximilian,' he explained. 'The saying goes that he is at Rosny.'

'I can answer for that being false,' M. de Rosny answered peremptorily, 'for I have just come from there, and I will answer for it he is not within ten leagues of the place. And now, sir, as we desire to enter before the gates shut, perhaps you will excuse us.' With which he bowed, and I bowed, and they bowed, and we separated. They gave us the road, which M. de Rosny took with a great air, and we trotted to the gate, and passed through it without misadventure.

The first street we entered was a wide one, and my companion took advantage of this to ride up abreast of me. 'That is the kind of adventure our little prince is fond of,' he muttered. 'But for my part, M. de Marsac, the sweat is running down my forehead. I have played the trick more than once before, for my brother and I are as like as two peas. And yet it would have gone ill with us if the fool had been one of his friends.'

'All's well that ends well,' I answered in a low voice, thinking it an ill time for compliments. As it was, the remark was unfortunate, for M. de Rosny was still in the act of reining back when Maignan called out to us to say we were being followed.

I looked behind, but could see nothing except gloom and rain and overhanging eaves and a few figures cowering in doorways. The servants, however, continued to maintain

that it was so, and we held, without actually stopping, a council of war. If detected, we were caught in a trap, without hope of escape; and for the moment I am sure M. de Rosny regretted that he had chosen this route by Blois —that he had thrust himself, in his haste and his desire to take with him the latest news, into a snare so patent. The castle—huge, dark, and grim—loomed before us at the end of the street in which we were, and, chilled as I was myself by the sight, I could imagine how much more appalling it must appear to him, the chosen counsellor of his master, and the steadfast opponent of all which it represented.

Our consultation came to nothing, for no better course suggested itself than to go as we had intended to the lodging commonly used by my companion. We did so, looking behind us often, and saying more than once that Maignan must be mistaken. As soon as we had dismounted, however, and gone in, he showed us from the window a man loitering near; and this confirmation of our alarm sending us to our expedients again, while Maignan remained watching in a room without a light, I suggested that I might pass myself off, though ten years older, for my companion.

'Alas!' he said, drumming with his fingers on the table, 'there are too many here who know me to make that possible. I thank you all the same.'

'Could you escape on foot? Or pass the wall anywhere, or slip through the gates early?' I suggested.

'They might tell us at the Bleeding Heart,' he answered. 'But I doubt it. I was a fool, sir, to put my neck into Mendoza's halter, and that is a fact. But here is Maignan. What is it, man?' he continued eagerly.

'The watcher is gone, my lord,' the equerry answered.

'And has left no one?'

'No one that I can see.'

We both went into the next room and looked from the windows. The man was certainly not where we had seen him before. But the rain was falling heavily, the eaves were dripping, the street was a dark cavern with only here

and there a spark of light, and the fellow might be lurking elsewhere. Maignan, being questioned, however, believed he had gone off of set purpose.

'Which may be read half a dozen ways,' I remarked.

'At any rate, we are fasting,' M. de Rosny answered. 'Give me a full man in a fight. Let us sit down and eat. It is no good jumping in the dark, or meeting troubles half way.'

We were not through our meal, however, Simon Fleix waiting on us with a pale face, when Maignan came in again from the dark room. 'My lord,' he said quietly, 'three men have appeared. Two of them remain twenty paces away. The third has come to the door.'

As he spoke we heard a cautious summons below. Maignan was for going down, but his master bade him stand. 'Let the woman of the house go,' he said.

I remarked and long remembered M. de Rosny's *sangfroid* on this occasion. His pistols he had already laid on a chair beside him, throwing his cloak over them; and now, while we waited, listening in breathless silence, I saw him hand a large slice of bread-and-meat to his equerry, who, standing behind his chair, began eating it with the same coolness. Simon Fleix, on the other hand, stood gazing at the door, trembling in every limb, and with so much of excitement and surprise in his attitude that I took the precaution of bidding him, in a low voice, do nothing without orders. At the same moment it occurred to me to extinguish two of the four candles which had been lighted; and I did so, M. de Rosny nodding assent, just as the muttered conversation which was being carried on below ceased, and a man's tread sounded on the stairs.

It was followed immediately by a knock on the outside of our door. Obeying my companion's look, I cried, 'Enter!'

A slender man of middle height, booted and wrapped up, with his face almost entirely hidden by a fold of his cloak, came in quickly, and, closing the door behind him, advanced towards the table. 'Which is M. de Rosny?' he said.

Rosny had carefully turned his face from the light, but at the sound of the other's voice he sprang up with a cry of relief. He was about to speak, when the new-comer, raising his hand peremptorily, continued, 'No names, I beg. Yours, I suppose, is known here. Mine is not, nor do I desire it should be. I want speech of you, that is all.'

'I am greatly honoured,' M. de Rosny replied, gazing at him eagerly. 'Yet, who told you I was here?'

'I saw you pass under a lamp in the street,' the stranger answered. 'I knew your horse first, and you afterwards, and bade a groom follow you. Believe me,' he added, with a gesture of the hand, 'you have nothing to fear from me.'

'I accept the assurance in the spirit in which it is offered,' my companion answered with a graceful bow, 'and think myself fortunate in being recognised'—he paused a moment and then continued—'by a Frenchman and a man of honour.'

The stranger shrugged his shoulders. 'Your pardon, then,' he said, 'if I seem abrupt. My time is short. I want to do the best with it I can. Will you favour me?'

I was for withdrawing, but M. de Rosny ordered Maignan to place lights in the next room, and, apologising to me very graciously, retired thither with the stranger; leaving me relieved indeed by these peaceful appearances, but full of wonder and conjectures who this might be, and what the visit portended. At one moment I was inclined to identify the stranger with M. de Rosny's brother; at another with the English ambassador; and then, again, a wild idea that he might be M. de Bruhl occurred to me. The two remained together about a quarter of an hour and then came out, the stranger leading the way, and saluting me politely as he passed through the room. At the door he turned to say, 'At nine o'clock, then?'

'At nine o'clock,' M. de Rosny replied, holding the door open. 'You will excuse me if I do not descend, Marquis?'

'Yes, go back, my friend,' the stranger answered. And, lighted by Maignan, whose face on such occasions could

assume the most stolid air in the world, he disappeared down the stairs, and I heard him go out.

M. de Rosny turned to me, his eyes sparkling with joy, his face and mien full of animation. 'The King of Navarre is better,' he said. 'He is said to be out of danger. What do you think of that, my friend?'

'That is the best news I have heard for many a day,' I answered. And I hastened to add, that France and the Religion had reason to thank God for His mercy.

'Amen to that,' my patron replied reverently. 'But that is not all—that is not all.' And he began to walk up and down the room humming the 118th Psalm a little above his breath—

> La voici l'heureuse journée
> Que Dieu a faite à plein désir;
> Par nous soit joie démenée,
> Et prenons en elle plaisir.

He continued, indeed, to walk up and down the floor so long, and with so joyful a countenance and demeanour, that I ventured at last to remind him of my presence, which he had clearly forgotten. 'Ha! to be sure,' he said, stopping short and looking at me with the utmost good-humour. 'What time is it? Seven. Then until nine o'clock, my friend, I crave your indulgence. In fine, until that time I must keep counsel. Come, I am hungry still. Let us sit down, and this time I hope we may not be interrupted. Simon, set us on a fresh bottle. Ha! ha! *Vivent le Roi et le Roi de Navarre!*' And again he fell to humming the same psalm—

> O Dieu éternel, je te prie,
> Je te prie, ton roi maintiens:
> O Dieu, je te prie et reprie,
> Sauve ton roi et l'entretiens!

doing so with a light in his eyes and a joyous emphasis, which impressed me the more in a man ordinarily so calm and self-contained. I saw that something had occurred to

gratify him beyond measure, and, believing his statement that this was not the good news from La Ganache only, I waited with the utmost interest and anxiety for the hour of nine, which had no sooner struck than our former visitor appeared with the same air of mystery and disguise which had attended him before.

M. de Rosny, who had risen on hearing his step and had taken up his cloak, paused with it half on and half off, to cry anxiously, 'All is well, is it not?'

'Perfectly,' the stranger replied, with a nod.

'And my friend?'

'Yes, on condition that you answer for his discretion and fidelity.' And the stranger glanced involuntarily at me, who stood uncertain whether to hold my ground or retire.

'Good,' M. de Rosny cried. Then he turned to me with a mingled air of dignity and kindness, and continued: 'This is the gentleman. M. de Marsac, I am honoured with permission to present you to the Marquis de Rambouillet, whose interest and protection I beg you to deserve, for he is a true Frenchman and a patriot whom I respect.'

M. de Rambouillet saluted me politely. 'Of a Brittany family, I think?' he said.

I assented; and he replied with something complimentary. But afterwards he continued to look at me in silence with a keenness and curiosity I did not understand. At last, when M. de Rosny's impatience had reached a high pitch, the marquis seemed impelled to add something. 'You quite understand, M. de Rosny?' he said. 'Without saying anything disparaging of M. de Marsac, who is, no doubt, a man of honour'—and he bowed to me very low—'this is a delicate matter, and you will introduce no one into it, I am sure, whom you cannot trust as yourself.'

'Precisely,' M. de Rosny replied, speaking drily, yet with a grand air which fully matched his companion's. 'I am prepared to trust this gentleman not only with my life but with my honour.'

'Nothing more remains to be said then,' the marquis re-

joined, bowing to me again. 'I am glad to have been the occasion of a declaration so flattering to you, sir.'

I returned his salute in silence, and obeying M. de Rosny's muttered direction put on my cloak and sword. M. de Rosny took up his pistols.

'You will have no need of those,' the marquis said with a high glance.

'Where we are going, no,' my companion answered, calmly continuing to dispose them about him. 'But the streets are dark and not too safe.'

M. de Rambouillet laughed. 'That is the worst of you Huguenots,' he said. 'You never know when to lay suspicion aside.'

A hundred retorts sprang to my lips. I thought of the Bartholomew, of the French fury of Antwerp, of half a dozen things which make my blood boil to this day. But M. de Rosny's answer was the finest of all. 'That is true, I am afraid,' he said quietly. 'On the other hand, you Catholics—take the late M. de Guise for instance—have the habit of erring on the other side, I think, and sometimes trust too far.'

The marquis, without making any answer to this home-thrust, led the way out, and we followed, being joined at the door of the house by a couple of armed lackeys, who fell in behind us. We went on foot. The night was dark, and the prospect out of doors was not cheering. The streets were wet and dirty, and notwithstanding all our care we fell continually into pitfalls or over unseen obstacles. Crossing the *parvis* of the cathedral, which I remembered, we plunged in silence into an obscure street near the river, and so narrow that the decrepit houses shut out almost all view of the sky. The gloom of our surroundings, no less than my ignorance of the errand on which we were bound, filled me with anxiety and foreboding. My companions keeping strict silence, however, and taking every precaution to avoid being recognised, I had no choice but to do likewise.

I could think, and no more. I felt myself borne along by an irresistible current, whither and for what purpose I could not tell; an experience to an extent strange at my age the influence of the night and the weather. Twice we stood aside to let a party of roisterers go by, and the excessive care M. de Rambouillet evinced on these occasions to avoid recognition did not tend to reassure me or make me think more lightly of the unknown business on which I was bound.

Reaching at last an open space, our leader bade us in a low voice be careful and follow him closely. We did so, and crossed in this way and in single file a narrow plank or wooden bridge; but whether water ran below or a dry ditch only, I could not determine. My mind was taken up at the moment with the discovery which I had just made, that the dark building, looming huge and black before us with a single light twinkling here and there at great heights, was the Castle of Blois.

CHAPTER XV.

VILAIN HERODES.

All the distaste and misliking I had expressed earlier in the day for the Court of Blois recurred with fresh force in the darkness and gloom; and though, booted and travel-stained as we were, I did not conceive it likely that we should be obtruded on the circle about the king, I felt none the less an oppressive desire to be through with our adventure, and away from the ill-omened precincts in which I found myself. The darkness prevented me seeing the faces of my companions; but on M. de Rosny, who was not quite free himself, I think, from the influences of the time and place, twitching my sleeve to enforce vigilance, I noted that the lackeys had ceased to follow us, and that we three

were beginning to ascend a rough staircase cut in the rock. I gathered, though the darkness limited my view behind as well as in front to a few twinkling lights, that we were mounting the scarp from the moat to the side wall of the castle; and I was not surprised when the marquis muttered to us to stop, and knocked softly on the wood of a door.

M. de Rosny might have spared the touch he had laid on my sleeve, for by this time I was fully and painfully sensible of the critical position in which we stood, and was very little likely to commit an indiscretion. I trusted he had not done so already! No doubt—it flashed across me while we waited—he had taken care to safeguard himself. But how often, I reflected, had all safeguards been set aside and all precautions eluded by those to whom he was committing himself! Guise had thought himself secure in this very building, which we were about to enter. Coligny had received the most absolute of safe-conducts from those to whom we were apparently bound. The end in either case had been the same—the confidence of the one proving of no more avail than the wisdom of the other. What if the King of France thought to make his peace with his Catholic subjects—offended by the murder of Guise—by a second murder of one as obnoxious to them as he was precious to their arch-enemy in the South? Rosny was sagacious indeed; but then I reflected with sudden misgiving that he was young, ambitious, and bold.

The opening of the door interrupted without putting an end to this train of apprehension. A faint light shone out; so feebly as to illumine little more than the stairs at our feet. The marquis entered at once, M. de Rosny followed, I brought up the rear; and the door was closed by a man who stood behind it. We found ourselves crowded together at the foot of a very narrow staircase, which the doorkeeper —a stolid pikeman in a grey uniform, with a small lanthorn swinging from the crosspiece of his halberd—signed to us to ascend. I said a word to him, but he only stared in answer, and M. de Rambouillet, looking back and seeing

what I was about, called to me that it was useless, as the man was a Swiss and spoke no French.

This did not tend to reassure me; any more than did the chill roughness of the wall which my hand touched as I groped upwards, or the smell of bats which invaded my nostrils and suggested that the staircase was little used and belonged to a part of the castle fitted for dark and secret doings.

We stumbled in the blackness up the steps, passing one door and then a second before M. de Rambouillet whispered to us to stand, and knocked gently at a third.

The secrecy, the darkness, and above all the strange arrangements made to receive us, filled me with the wildest conjectures. But when the door opened and we passed one by one into a bare, unfurnished, draughty gallery, immediately, as I judged, under the tiles, the reality agreed with no one of my anticipations. The place was a mere garret, without a hearth, without a single stool. Three windows, of which one was roughly glazed, while the others were filled with oiled paper, were set in one wall; the others displaying the stones and mortar without disguise or ornament. Beside the door through which we had entered stood a silent figure in the grey uniform I had seen below, his lanthorn on the floor at his feet. A second door at the farther end of the gallery, which was full twenty paces long, was guarded in like manner. A couple of lanthorns stood in the middle of the floor, and that was all.

Inside the door, M. de Rambouillet with his finger on his lip stopped us, and we stood a little group of three a pace in front of the sentry, and with the empty room before us. I looked at M. de Rosny, but he was looking at Rambouillet. The marquis had his back towards me, the sentry was gazing into vacancy; so that baffled in my attempt to learn anything from the looks of the other actors in the scene, I fell back on my ears. The rain dripped outside and the moaning wind rattled the casements; but mingled with these melancholy sounds—which gained force as such

things always do, from the circumstances in which we were placed and our own silence—I fancied I caught the distant hum of voices and music and laughter. And that, I know not why, brought M. de Guise again to my mind.

The story of his death, as I had heard it from that accursed monk in the inn on the Claine, rose up in all its freshness, with all its details. I started when M. de Rambouillet coughed. I shivered when Rosny shifted his feet. The silence grew oppressive. Only the stolid men in grey seemed unmoved, unexpectant; so that I remember wondering whether it was their nightly duty to keep guard over an empty garret, the floor strewn with scraps of mortar and ends of tiles.

The interruption, when it came at last, came suddenly. The sentry at the farther end of the gallery started and fell back a pace. Instantly the door beside him opened and a man came in, and closing it quickly behind him, advanced up the room with an air of dignity, which even his strange appearance and attire could not wholly destroy.

He was of good stature and bearing, about forty years old as I judged, his wear a dress of violet velvet with black points cut in the extreme of the fashion. He carried a sword but no ruff, and had a cup and ball of ivory—a strange toy much in vogue among the idle—suspended from his wrist by a ribbon. He was lean and somewhat narrow, but so far I found little fault with him. It was only when my eye reached his face, and saw it rouged like a woman's and surmounted by a little turban, that a feeling of scarcely understood disgust seized me, and I said to myself, 'This is the stuff of which kings' minions are made!'

To my surprise, however, M. de Rambouillet went to meet him with the utmost respect, sweeping the dirty floor with his bonnet, and bowing to the very ground. The newcomer acknowledged his salute with negligent kindness. Remarking pleasantly 'You have brought a friend, I think?' he looked towards us with a smile.

'Yes, sire, he is here,' the marquis answered, stepping

aside a little. And with the word I understood that this was no minion, but the king himself: Henry, the Third of the name, and the last of the great House of Valois, which had ruled France by the grace of God for two centuries and a half! I stared at him, and stared at him, scarcely believing what I saw. For the first time in my life I was in the presence of the king!

Meanwhile M. de Rosny, to whom he was, of course, no marvel, had gone forward and knelt on one knee. The king raised him graciously, and with an action which, viewed apart from his woman's face and silly turban, seemed royal and fitting. 'This is good of you, Rosny,' he said. 'But it is only what I expected of you.'

'Sire,' my companion answered, 'your Majesty has no more devoted servant than myself, unless it be the king my master.'

'By my faith,' Henry answered with energy—'and if I am not a good churchman, whatever those rascally Parisians say, I am nothing—by my faith, I think I believe you!'

'If your Majesty would believe me in that and in some other things also,' M. de Rosny answered, 'it would be very well for France.' Though he spoke courteously, he threw so much weight and independence into his words that I thought of the old proverb, 'A good master, a bold servant.'

'Well, that is what we are here to see,' the king replied. 'But one tells me one thing,' he went on fretfully, 'and one another, and which am I to believe?'

'I know nothing of others, sire,' Rosny answered with the same spirit. 'But my master has every claim to be believed. His interest in the royalty of France is second only to your Majesty's. He is also a king and a kinsman, and it irks him to see rebels beard you, as has happened of late.'

'Ay, but the chief of them?' Henry exclaimed, giving way to sudden excitement and stamping furiously on the

floor. 'He will trouble me no more. Has my brother heard of *that?* Tell me, sir, has that news reached him?'

'He has heard it, sire.'

'And he approved? He approved, of course?'

'Beyond doubt the man was a traitor,' M. de Rosny answered delicately. 'His life was forfeit, sire. Who can question it?'

'And he has paid the forfeit,' the king rejoined, looking down at the floor and immediately falling into a moodiness as sudden as his excitement. His lips moved. He muttered something inaudible, and began to play absently with his cup and ball, his mind occupied apparently with a gloomy retrospect. 'M. de Guise, M. de Guise,' he murmured at last, with a sneer and an accent of hate which told of old humiliations long remembered. 'Well, damn him, he is dead now. He is dead. But being dead he yet troubles us. Is not that the verse, father? Ha!' with a start, 'I was forgetting. But that is the worst wrong he has done me,' he continued, looking up and growing excited again. 'He has cut me off from Mother Church. There is hardly a priest comes near me now, and presently they will excommunicate me. And, as I hope for salvation, the Church has no more faithful son than me.'

I believe he was on the point, forgetting M. de Rosny's presence there and his errand, of giving way to unmanly tears, when M. de Rambouillet, as if by accident, let the heel of his scabbard fall heavily on the floor. The king started, and passing his hand once or twice across his brow, seemed to recover himself. 'Well,' he said, 'no doubt we shall find a way out of our difficulties.'

'If your Majesty,' Rosny answered respectfully, 'would accept the aid my master proffers, I venture to think that they would vanish the quicker.'

'You think so,' Henry rejoined. 'Well, give me your shoulder. Let us walk a little.' And, signing to Rambouillet to leave him, he began to walk up and down with M. de Rosny, talking familiarly with him in an undertone.

Only such scraps of the conversation as fell from them when they turned at my end of the gallery now reached me. Patching these together, however, I managed to understand somewhat. At one turn I heard the king say, 'But then Turenne offers——' At the next, 'Trust him? Well, I do not know why I should not. He promises——' Then 'A Republic, Rosny? That his plan? Pooh! he dare not. He could not. France is a kingdom by the ordinance of God in my family.'

I gathered from these and other chance words, which I have since forgotten, that M. de Rosny was pressing the king to accept the help of the King of Navarre, and warning him against the insidious offers of the Vicomte de Turenne. The mention of a Republic, however, seemed to excite his Majesty's wrath rather against Rosny for presuming to refer to such a thing than against Turenne, to whom he refused to credit it. He paused near my end of the promenade.

'Prove it!' he said angrily. 'But can you prove it? Can you prove it? Mind you, I will take no hearsay evidence, sir. Now, there is Turenne's agent here—you did not know, I dare say, that he had an agent here?'

'You refer, sire, to M. de Bruhl,' Rosny answered, without hesitation. 'I know him, sire.'

'I think you are the devil,' Henry answered, looking curiously at him. 'You seem to know most things. But mind you, my friend, he speaks me fairly, and I will not take this on hearsay even from your master. Though,' he added after pausing a moment, 'I love him.'

'And he, your Majesty. He desires only to prove it.'

'Yes, I know, I know,' the king answered fretfully. 'I believe he does. I believe he does wish me well. But there will be a devil of an outcry among my people. And Turenne gives fair words too. And I do not know,' he continued, fidgeting with his cup and ball, 'that it might not suit me better to agree with him, you see.'

I saw M. de Rosny draw himself up. 'Dare I speak

openly to you, sire,' he said, with less respect and more energy than he had hitherto used. 'As I should to my master?'

'Ay, say what you like,' Henry answered. But he spoke sullenly, and it seemed to me that he looked less pleasantly at his companion.

'Then I will venture to utter what is in your Majesty's mind,' my patron answered steadfastly. 'You fear, sire, lest, having accepted my master's offer and conquered your enemies, you should not be easily rid of him.'

Henry looked relieved. 'Do you call that diplomacy?' he said with a smile. 'However, what if it be so? What do you say to it? Methinks I have heard an idle tale about a horse which would hunt a stag; and for the purpose set a man upon its back.'

'This I say, sire, first,' Rosny answered very earnestly. 'That the King of Navarre is popular only with one-third of the kingdom, and is only powerful when united with you. Secondly, sire, it is his interest to support the royal power, to which he is heir. And, thirdly, it must be more to your Majesty's honour to accept help from a near kinsman than from an ordinary subject, and one who, I still maintain, sire, has no good designs in his mind.'

'The proof?' Henry said sharply. 'Give me that!'

'I can give it in a week from this day.'

'It must be no idle tale, mind you,' the king continued suspiciously.

'You shall have Turenne's designs, sire, from one who had them from his own mouth.'

The king looked startled, but after a pause turned and resumed his walk. 'Well,' he said, 'if you do that, I on my part——'

The rest I lost, for the two passing to the farther end of the gallery, came to a standstill there, balking my curiosity and Rambouillet's also. The marquis, indeed, began to betray his impatience, and the great clock immediately over our heads presently striking the half-hour after ten

he started and made as if he would have approached the king. He checked the impulse, however, but still continued to fidget uneasily, losing his reserve by-and-by so far as to whisper to me that his Majesty would be missed.

I had been, up to this point, a silent and inactive spectator of a scene which appealed to my keenest interests and aroused my most ardent curiosity. Surprise following surprise, I had begun to doubt my own identity; so little had I expected to find myself first in the presence of the Most Christian King—and that under circumstances as strange and bizarre as could well be imagined—and then an authorised witness at a negotiation upon which the future of all the great land of France stretching for so many hundred leagues on every side of us, depended. I say I could scarcely believe in my own identity; or that I was the same Gaston de Marsac who had slunk, shabby and out-at-elbows, about St. Jean d'Angely. I tasted the first sweetness of secret power, which men say is the sweetest of all and the last relinquished; and, the hum of distant voices and laughter still reaching me at intervals, I began to understand why we had been admitted with so much precaution, and to comprehend the gratification of M. de Rosny when the promise of this interview first presented to him the hope of effecting so much for his master and for France.

Now I was to be drawn into the whirlpool itself. I was still travelling back over the different stages of the adventure which had brought me to this point, when I was rudely awakened by M. de Rosny calling my name in a raised voice. Seeing, somewhat late, that he was beckoning to me to approach, I went forward in a confused and hasty fashion; kneeling before the king as I had seen him kneel, and then rising to give ear to his Majesty's commands. Albeit, having expected nothing less than to be called upon, I was not in the clearest mood to receive them. Nor was my bearing such as I could have wished it to be.

'M. de Rosny tells me that you desire a commission at Court, sir,' the king said quickly.

'I, sire?' I stammered, scarcely able to believe my ears. I was so completely taken aback that I could say no more, and I stopped there with my mouth open.

'There are few things I can deny M. de Rosny,' Henry continued, speaking very rapidly, 'and I am told that you are a gentleman of birth and ability. Out of kindness to him, therefore, I grant you a commission to raise twenty men for my service. Rambouillet,' he continued, raising his voice slightly, 'you will introduce this gentleman to me publicly to-morrow, that I may carry into effect my intention on his behalf. You may go now, sir. No thanks. And M. de Rosny,' he added, turning to my companion and speaking with energy, 'have a care for my sake that you are not recognised as you go. Rambouillet must contrive something to enable you to leave without peril. I should be desolated if anything happened to you, my friend, for I could not protect you. I give you my word if Mendoza or Retz found you in Blois I could not save you from them unless you recanted.'

'I will not trouble either your Majesty or my conscience,' M. de Rosny replied, bowing low, 'if my wits can help me.'

'Well, the saints keep you,' the king answered piously, going towards the door by which he had entered; 'for your master and I have both need of you. Rambouillet, take care of him as you love me. And come early in the morning to my closet and tell me how it has fared with him.'

We all stood bowing while he withdrew, and only turned to retire when the door closed behind him. Burning with indignation and chagrin as I was at finding myself disposed of in the way I have described, and pitchforked, whether I would or no, into a service I neither fancied nor desired, I still managed for the present to restrain myself; and, permitting my companions to precede me, followed in silence, listening sullenly to their jubilations. The marquis seemed scarcely less pleased than M. de Rosny; and as the latter evinced a strong desire to lessen any jealousy the former might feel, and a generous inclination to attribute to him a

full share of the credit gained, I remained the only person dissatisfied with the evening's events. We retired from the château with the same precautions which had marked our entrance, and parting with M. de Rambouillet at the door of our lodging—not without many protestations of esteem on his part and of gratitude on that of M. de Rosny —mounted to the first-floor in single file and in silence, which I was determined not to be the first to break.

Doubtless M. de Rosny knew my thoughts, for, speedily dismissing Maignan and Simon, who were in waiting, he turned to me without preface. 'Come, my friend,' he said, laying his hand on my shoulder and looking me in the face in a way which all but disarmed me at once, 'do not let us misunderstand one another. You think you have cause to be angry with me. I cannot suffer that, for the King of Navarre had never greater need of your services than now.'

'You have played me an unworthy trick, sir,' I answered, thinking he would cozen me with fair speeches.

'Tut, tut!' he replied. 'You do not understand.'

'I understand well enough,' I answered, with bitterness, 'that, having done the King of Navarre's work, he would now be rid of me.'

'Have I not told you,' M. de Rosny replied, betraying for the first time some irritation, 'that he has greater need of your services than ever? Come, man, be reasonable, or, better still, listen to me.' And turning from me, he began to walk up and down the room, his hands behind him. 'The King of France—I want to make it as clear to you as possible—' he said, 'cannot make head against the League without help, and, willy-nilly, must look for it to the Huguenots whom he has so long persecuted. The King of Navarre, their acknowledged leader, has offered that help; and so, to spite my master, and prevent a combination so happy for France, has M. de Turenne, who would fain raise the faction he commands to eminence, and knows well how to make his profit out of the dissensions of his country. Are you clear so far, sir?'

I assented. I was becoming absorbed in spite of myself.

'Very well,' he resumed. 'This evening—never did anything fall out more happily than Rambouillet's meeting with me—he is a good man!—I have brought the king to this: that if proof of the selfish nature of Turenne's designs be laid before him he will hesitate no longer. That proof exists. A fortnight ago it was here; but it is not here now.'

'That is unlucky!' I exclaimed. I was so much interested in his story, as well as flattered by the confidence he was placing in me, that my ill-humour vanished. I went and stood with my shoulder against the mantelpiece, and ne, passing to and fro between me and the light, continued his tale.

'A word about this proof,' he said. 'It came into the King of Navarre's hands before its full value was known to us, for that only accrued to it on M. de Guise's death. A month ago it—this piece of evidence I mean—was at Chizé. A fortnight or so ago it was here in Blois. It is now, M. de Marsac,' he continued, facing me suddenly as he came opposite me, 'in my house at Rosny.'

I started. 'You mean Mademoiselle de la Vire?' I cried.

'I mean Mademoiselle de la Vire!' he answered, 'who, some month or two ago, overheard M. de Turenne's plans, and contrived to communicate with the King of Navarre. Before the latter could arrange a private interview, however, M. de Turenne got wind of her dangerous knowledge, and swept her off to Chizé. The rest you know, M. de Marsac, if any man knows it.'

'But what will you do?' I asked. 'She is at Rosny.'

'Maignan, whom I trust implicitly, as far as his lights go, will start to fetch her to-morrow. At the same hour I start southwards. You, M. de Marsac, will remain here as my agent, to watch over my interests, to receive Mademoiselle on her arrival, to secure for her a secret interview with the king, to guard her while she remains here. Do you anderstand?'

Did I understand? I could not find words in which to thank him. My remorse and gratitude, my sense of the wrong I had done him, and of the honour he was doing me, were such that I stood mute before him as I had stood before the king. 'You accept, then?' he said, smiling. 'You do not deem the adventure beneath you, my friend?'

'I deserve your confidence so little, sir,' I answered, stricken to the ground, 'that I beg you to speak, while I listen. By attending exactly to your instructions I may prove worthy of the trust reposed in me. And only so.'

He embraced me again and again, with a kindness which moved me almost to tears. 'You are a man after my own heart,' he said, 'and if God wills I will make your fortune. Now listen, my friend. To-morrow at Court, as a stranger and a man introduced by Rambouillet, you will be the cynosure of all eyes. Bear yourself bravely. Pay court to the women, but attach yourself to no one in particular. Keep aloof from Retz and the Spanish faction, but beware especially of Bruhl. He alone will have your secret, and may suspect your design. Mademoiselle should be here in a week; while she is with you, and until she has seen the king, trust no one, suspect everyone, fear all things. Consider the battle won only when the king says, "I am satisfied."'

Much more he told me, which served its purpose and has been forgotten. Finally he honoured me by bidding me share his pallet with him, that we might talk without restraint, and that if anything occurred to him in the night he might communicate it to me.

'But will not Bruhl denounce me as a Huguenot?' I asked him.

'He will not dare to do so,' M. de Rosny answered, 'both as a Huguenot himself, and as his master's representative; and, further, because it would displease the king. No, but whatever secret harm one man can do another, that you have to fear. Maignan, when he returns with mademoiselle, will leave two men with you; until they come I

should borrow a couple of stout fellows from Rambouillet. Do not go out alone after dark, and beware of doorways, especially your own.'

A little later, when I thought him asleep, I heard him chuckle; and rising on my elbow I asked him what it was. 'Oh, it is your affair,' he answered, still laughing silently, so that I felt the mattress shake under him. 'I don't envy you one part of your task, my friend.'

'What is that?' I said suspiciously.

'Mademoiselle,' he answered, stifling with difficulty a burst of laughter. And after that he would not say another word, bad, good, or indifferent, though I felt the bed shake more than once, and knew that he was digesting his pleasantry.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE KING'S CHAMBER.

M. DE ROSNY had risen from my side and started on his journey when I opened my eyes in the morning, and awoke to the memory of the task which had been so strangely imposed upon me; and which might, according as the events of the next fortnight shaped themselves, raise me to high position or put an end to my career. He had not forgotten to leave a souvenir behind him, for I found beside my pillow a handsome silver-mounted pistol, bearing the letter 'R.' and a coronet; nor had I more than discovered this instance of his kindness before Simon Fleix came in to tell me that M. de Rosny had left two hundred crowns in his hands for me.

'Any message with it?' I asked the lad.

'Only that he had taken a keepsake in exchange,' Simon answered, opening the window as he spoke.

In some wonder I began to search, but I could not discover that anything was missing until I came to put on my

doublet, when I found that the knot of ribbon which mademoiselle had flung to me at my departure from Rosny was gone from the inside of the breast, where I had pinned it for safety with a long thorn. The discovery that M. de Rosny had taken this was displeasing to me on more than one account. In the first place, whether mademoiselle had merely wished to plague me (as was most probable) or not, I was loth to lose it, my day for ladies' favours being past and gone; in the second, I misdoubted the motive which had led him to purloin it, and tormented myself with thinking of the different constructions he might put upon it, and the disparaging view of my trustworthiness which it might lead him to take. I blamed myself much for my carelessness in leaving it where a chance eye might rest upon it; and more when, questioning Simon further, I learned that M. de Rosny had added, while mounting at the door, 'Tell your master, safe bind, safe find; and a careless lover makes a loose mistress.'

I felt my cheek burn in a manner unbecoming my years while Simon with some touch of malice repeated this; and I made a vow on the spot, which I kept until I was tempted to break it, to have no more to do with such trifles. Meanwhile, I had to make the best of it; and brisking up, and bidding Simon, who seemed depressed by the baron's departure, brisk up also, I set about my preparations for making such a figure at Court as became me: procuring a black velvet suit, and a cap and feather to match; item, a jewelled clasp to secure the feather; with a yard or two of lace and two changes of fine linen.

Simon had grown sleek at Rosny, and losing something of the wildness which had marked him, presented in the dress M. de Rosny had given him a very creditable appearance; being also, I fancy, the only equerry in Blois who could write. A groom I engaged on the recommendation of M. de Rambouillet's master of the horse; and I gave out also that I required a couple of valets. It needed only an hour under the barber's hands and a set of new trappings

for the Cid to enable me to make a fair show, such as might be taken to indicate a man of ten or twelve thousand livres a year.

In this way I expended a hundred and fifteen crowns. Reflecting that this was a large sum, and that I must keep some money for play, I was glad to learn that in the crowded state of the city even men with high rank were putting up with poor lodging; I determined, therefore, to combine economy with a scheme which I had in my head by taking the rooms in which my mother died, with one room below them. This I did, hiring such furniture as I needed, which was not a great deal. To Simon Fleix, whose assistance in these matters was invaluable, I passed on much of M. de Rosny's advice, bidding him ruffle it with the best in his station, and inciting him to labour for my advancement by promising to make his fortune whenever my own should be assured. I hoped, indeed, to derive no little advantage from the quickness of wit which had attracted M. de Rosny's attention; although I did not fail to take into account at the same time that the lad was wayward and fitful, prone at one time to depression, and at another to giddiness, and equally uncertain in either mood.

M. de Rambouillet being unable to attend the *levée*, had appointed me to wait upon him at six in the evening; at which hour I presented myself at his lodgings, attended by Simon Fleix. I found him in the midst of half a dozen gentlemen whose habit it was to attend him upon all public occasions; and these gallants, greeting me with the same curious and suspicious glances which I have seen hounds bestow on a strange dog introduced into their kennel, I was speedily made to feel that it is one thing to have business at Court, and another to be well received there.

M. de Rambouillet, somewhat to my surprise, did nothing to remove this impression. On all ordinary occasions a man of stiff and haughty bearing, and thoroughly disliking, though he could not prevent, the intrusion of a third party

into a transaction which promised an infinity of credit, he received me so coldly and with so much reserve as for the moment to dash my spirits and throw me back on myself.

During the journey to the castle, however, which we performed on foot, attended by half a dozen armed servants bearing torches, I had time to recall M. de Rosny's advice, and to bethink me of the intimacy which that great man had permitted me; with so much effect in the way of heartening me, that as we crossed the courtyard of the castle I advanced myself, not without some murmuring on the part of others, to Rambouillet's elbow, considering that as I was attached to him by the king's command, this was my proper place. I had no desire to quarrel, however, and persisted for some time in disregarding the nudges and muttered words which were exchanged round me, and even the efforts which were made as we mounted the stairs to oust me from my position. But a young gentleman, who showed himself very forward in these attempts, presently stumbling against me, I found it necessary to look at him.

'Sir,' he said, in a small and lisping voice, 'you trod on my toe.'

Though I had not done so, I begged his pardon very politely. But as his only acknowledgment of this courtesy consisted in an attempt to get his knee in front of mine—we were mounting very slowly, the stairs being cumbered with a multitude of servants, who stood on either hand—I did tread on his toe, with a force and directness which made him cry out.

'What is the matter?' Rambouillet asked, looking back hastily.

'Nothing, M. le Marquis,' I answered, pressing on steadfastly.

'Sir,' my young friend said again, in the same lisping voice, 'you trod on my toe.'

'I believe I did, sir,' I answered.

'You have not yet apologised,' he murmured gently in my ear.

'Nay, there you are wrong,' I rejoined bluntly, 'for it is always my habit to apologise first and tread afterwards.'

He smiled as at a pleasant joke; and I am bound to say that his bearing was so admirable that if he had been my son I could have hugged him. 'Good!' he answered. 'No doubt your sword is as sharp as your wits, sir. I see,' he continued, glancing naïvely at my old scabbard—he was himself the very gem of a courtier, a slender youth with a pink-and-white complexion, a dark line for a moustache, and a pearl-drop in his ear—'it is longing to be out. Perhaps you will take a turn in the tennis-court to-morrow?'

'With pleasure, sir,' I answered, 'if you have a father, or your elder brother is grown up.'

What answer he would have made to this gibe I do not know, for at that moment we reached the door of the antechamber; and this being narrow, and a sentry in the grey uniform of the Swiss Guard compelling all to enter in single file, my young friend was forced to fall back, leaving me free to enter alone, and admire at my leisure a scene at once brilliant and sombre.

The Court being in mourning for the Queen-mother, black predominated in the dresses of those present, and set off very finely the gleaming jewels and gemmed sword-hilts which were worn by the more important personages. The room was spacious and lofty, hung with arras, and lit by candles burning in silver sconces; it rang as we entered with the shrill screaming of a parrot, which was being teased by a group occupying the farther of the two hearths. Near them play was going on at one table, and primero at a second. In a corner were three or four ladies, in a circle about a red-faced, plebeian-looking man, who was playing at forfeits with one of their number; while the middle of the room seemed dominated by a middle-sized man with a peculiarly inflamed and passionate countenance, who, seated on a table, was inveighing against someone or something in the most violent terms, his language being interlarded with all kinds of strange and forcible oaths. Two or three gen-

tlemen, who had the air of being his followers, stood about him, listening between submission and embarrassment; while beside the nearer fireplace, but at some distance from him, lounged a nobleman, very richly dressed, and wearing on his breast the Cross of the Holy Ghost; who seemed to be the object of his invective, but affecting to ignore it was engaged in conversation with a companion. A bystander muttering that Crillon had been drinking, I discovered with immense surprise that the declaimer on the table was that famous soldier; and I was still looking at him in wonder—for I had been accustomed all my life to associate courage with modesty—when, the door of the chamber suddenly opening, a general movement in that direction took place. Crillon, disregarding all precedency, sprang from his table and hurried first to the threshold. The Baron de Biron, on the other hand—for the gentleman by the fire was no other—waited, in apparent ignorance of the slight which was being put upon him, until M. de Rambouillet came up; then he went forward with him. Keeping close to my patron's elbow, I entered the chamber immediately behind him.

Crillon had already seized upon the king, and, when we entered, was stating his grievance in a voice not much lower than that which he had used outside. M. de Biron, seeing this, parted from the marquis, and, going aside with his former companion, sat down on a trunk against the wall; while Rambouillet, followed by myself and three or four gentlemen of his train, advanced to the king, who was standing near the alcove. His Majesty seeing him, and thankful, I think, for the excuse, waved Crillon off. 'Tut, tut!. You told me all that this morning,' he said good-naturedly. 'And here is Rambouillet, who has, I hope, something fresh to tell. Let him speak to me. Sanctus! Don't look at me as if you would run me through, man. Go and quarrel with someone of your own size.'

Crillon at this retired grumbling, and Henry, who had just risen from primero with the Duke of Nevers, nodded

to Rambouillet. 'Well, my friend, anything fresh?' he cried. He was more at his ease and looked more cheerful than at our former interview; yet still care and suspicion lurked about his peevish mouth, and in the hollows under his gloomy eyes. 'A new guest, a new face, or a new game —which have you brought?'

'In a sense, sire, a new face,' the marquis answered, bowing, and standing somewhat aside that I might have place.

'Well, I cannot say much for the pretty baggage,' quoth the king quickly. And amid a general titter he extended his hand to me. 'I'll be sworn, though,' he continued, as I rose from my knee, 'that you want something, my friend?'

'Nay, sire,' I answered, holding up my head boldly—for Crillon's behaviour had been a further lesson to me—'I have, by your leave, the advantage. For your Majesty has supplied me with a new jest. I see many new faces round me, and I have need only of a new game. If your Majesty would be pleased to grant me——'

'There! Said I not so?' cried the king, raising his hand with a laugh. 'He does want something. But he seems not undeserving. What does he pray, Rambouillet?'

'A small command,' M. de Rambouillet answered, readily playing his part. 'And your Majesty would oblige me if you could grant the Sieur de Marsac's petition. I will answer for it he is a man of experience.'

'Chut! A small command?' Henry ejaculated, sitting down suddenly in apparent ill-humour. 'It is what everyone wants—when they do not want big ones. Still, I suppose,' he continued, taking up a comfit-box, which lay beside him, and opening it, 'if you do not get what you want for him you will sulk like the rest, my friend.'

'Your Majesty has never had cause to complain of me,' quoth the marquis, forgetting his *rôle*, or too proud to play it.

'Tut, tut, tut, tut! Take it, and trouble me no more,'

the king rejoined. 'Will pay for twenty men do for him? Very well then. There, M. de Marsac,' he continued, nodding at me and yawning, 'your request is granted. You will find some other pretty baggages over there. Go to them. And now, Rambouillet,' he went on, resuming his spirits as he turned to matters of more importance, 'here is a new sweetmeat Zamet has sent me. I have made Zizi sick with it. Will you try it? It is flavoured with white mulberries.'

Thus dismissed, I fell back; and stood for a moment, at a loss whither to turn, in the absence of either friends or acquaintances. His Majesty, it is true, had bidden me go to certain pretty baggages, meaning, apparently, five ladies who were seated at the farther end of the room, diverting themselves with as many cavaliers; but the compactness of this party, the beauty of the ladies, and the merry peals of laughter which proceeded from them, telling of a wit and vivacity beyond the ordinary, sapped the resolution which had borne me well hitherto. I felt that to attack such a phalanx, even with a king's good will, was beyon the daring of a Crillon, and I looked round to see whether I could not amuse myself in some more modest fashion.

The material was not lacking. Crillon, still mouthing out his anger, strode up and down in front of the trunk on which M. de Biron was seated; but the latter was, or affected to be, asleep. 'Crillon is for ever going into rages now,' a courtier beside me whispered.

'Yes,' his fellow answered, with a shrug of the shoulder; 'it is a pity there is no one to tame him. But he has such a long reach, morbleu!'

'It is not that so much as the fellow's fury,' the first speaker rejoined under his breath. 'He fights like a mad thing; fencing is no use against him.'

The other nodded. For a moment the wild idea of winning renown by taming M. de Crillon occurred to me as I stood alone in the middle of the floor; but it had not more than passed through my brain when I felt my elbow

touched, and turned to find the young gentleman whom I had encountered on the stairs standing by my side.

'Sir,' he lisped, in the same small voice, 'I think you trod on my toe a while ago?'

I stared at him, wondering what he meant by this absurd repetition. 'Well, sir,' I answered drily, 'and if I did?'

'Perhaps,' he said, stroking his chin with his jewelled fingers, 'pending our meeting to-morrow, you would allow me to consider it as a kind of introduction?'

'If it please you,' I answered, bowing stiffly, and wondering what he would be at.

'Thank you,' he answered. 'It does please me, under the circumstances; for there is a lady here who desires a word with you. I took up her challenge. Will you follow me?'

He bowed, and turned in his languid fashion. I, turning too, saw, with secret dismay, that the five ladies, referred to above, were all now gazing at me, as expecting my approach; and this with such sportive glances as told only too certainly of some plot already in progress or some trick to be presently played me. Yet I could not see that I had any choice save to obey, and, following my leader with as much dignity as I could compass, I presently found myself bowing before the lady who sat nearest, and who seemed to be the leader of these nymphs.

'Nay, sir,' she said, eyeing me curiously, yet with a merry face, 'I do not need you; I do not look so high!'

Turning in confusion to the next, I was surprised to see before me the lady whose lodging I had invaded in my search for Mademoiselle de la Vire—she, I mean, who, having picked up the velvet knot, had dropped it so providentially where Simon Fleix found it. She looked at me, blushing and laughing, and the young gentleman, who had done her errand, presenting me by name, she asked me, while the others listened, whether I had found my mistress.

Before I could answer, the lady to whom I had first ad-

dressed myself interposed. 'Stop, sir!' she cried. 'What is this—a tale, a jest, a game, or a forfeit?'

'An adventure, madam,' I answered, bowing low.

'Of gallantry, I'll be bound,' she exclaimed. 'Fie, Madame de Bruhl, and you but six months married!'

Madame de Bruhl protested, laughing, that she had no more to do with it than Mercury. 'At the worst,' she said, 'I carried the *poulets!* But I can assure you, duchess, this gentleman should be able to tell us a very fine story, if he would.'

The duchess and all the other ladies clapping their hands at this, and crying out that the story must and should be told, I found myself in a prodigious quandary; and one wherein my wits derived as little assistance as possible from the bright eyes and saucy looks which environed me. Moreover, the commotion attracting other listeners, I found my position, while I tried to extricate myself, growing each moment worse, so that I began to fear that as I had little imagination I should perforce have to tell the truth. The mere thought of this threw me into a cold perspiration, lest I should let slip something of consequence, and prove myself unworthy of the trust which M. de Rosny had reposed in me.

At the moment when, despairing of extricating myself, I was stooping over Madame de Bruhl begging her to assist me, I heard, amid the babel of laughter and raillery which surrounded me—certain of the courtiers having already formed hands in a circle and sworn I should not depart without satisfying the ladies—a voice which struck a chord in my memory. I turned to see who the speaker was, and encountered no other than M. de Bruhl himself; who, with a flushed and angry face, was listening to the explanation which a friend was pouring into his ear. Standing at the moment with my knee on Madame de Bruhl's stool, and remembering very well the meeting on the stairs, I conceived in a flash that the man was jealous; but whether he had yet heard my name, or had any clew to link me with

the person who had rescued Mademoiselle de la Vire from his clutches, I could not tell. Nevertheless his presence led my thoughts into a new channel. The determination to punish him began to take form in my mind, and very quickly I regained my composure. Still I was for giving him one chance. Accordingly I stooped once more to Madame de Bruhl's ear, and begged her to spare me the embarrassment of telling my tale. But then, finding her pitiless, as I expected, and the rest of the company growing more and more insistent, I hardened my heart to go through with the fantastic notion which had occurred to me.

Indicating by a gesture that I was prepared to obey, and the duchess crying for a hearing, this was presently obtained, the sudden silence adding the king himself to my audience. 'What is it?' he asked, coming up effusively, with a lap-dog in his arms. 'A new scandal, eh?'

'No, sire, a new tale-teller,' the duchess answered pertly. 'If your Majesty will sit, we shall hear him the sooner.'

He pinched her ear and sat down in the chair which a page presented. 'What? is it Rambouillet's *grison* again?' he said with some surprise. 'Well, fire away, man. But who brought you forward as a Rabelais?'

There was a general cry of 'Madame de Bruhl!' whereat that lady shook her fair hair about her face, and cried out for someone to bring her a mask.

'Ha, I see!' said the king drily, looking pointedly at M. de Bruhl, who was as black as thunder. 'But go on, man.'

The king's advent, by affording me a brief respite, had enabled me to collect my thoughts, and, disregarding the ribald interruptions, which at first were frequent, I began as follows: 'I am no Rabelais, sire,' I said, 'but droll things happen to the most unlikely. Once upon a time it was the fortune of a certain swain, whom I will call Dromio, to arrive in a town not a hundred miles from Blois, having in his company a nymph of great beauty, who had been entrusted to his care by her parents. He had not more than lodged her in his apartments, however, before she was

decoyed away by a trick, and borne off against her will by a young gallant, who had seen her and been smitten by her charms. Dromio, returning, and finding his mistress gone, gave way to the most poignant grief. He ran up and down the city, seeking her in every place, and filling all places with his lamentations; but for a time in vain, until chance led him to a certain street, where, in an almost incredible manner, he found a clew to her by discovering underfoot a knot of velvet, bearing Phyllida's name wrought on it in delicate needlework, with the words, "A moi!"'

'Sanctus!' cried the king, amid a general murmur of surprise, 'that is well devised! Proceed, sir. Go on like that, and we will make your twenty men twenty-five.'

'Dromio,' I continued, 'at sight of this trifle experienced the most diverse emotions, for while he possessed in it a clew to his mistress's fate, he had still to use it so as to discover the place whither she had been hurried. It occurred to him at last to begin his search with the house before which the knot had lain. Ascending accordingly to the second-floor, he found there a fair lady reclining on a couch, who started up in affright at his appearance. He hastened to reassure her, and to explain the purpose of his coming, and learned after a conversation with which I will not trouble your Majesty, though it was sufficiently diverting, that the lady had found the velvet knot in another part of the town, and had herself dropped it again in front of her own house.'

'Pourquoi?' the king asked, interrupting me.

'The swain, sire,' I answered, 'was too much taken up with his own troubles to bear that in mind, even if he learned it. But this delicacy did not save him from misconception, for as he descended from the lady's apartment he met her husband on the stairs.'

'Good!' the king exclaimed, rubbing his hands in glee. 'The husband!' And under cover of the gibe and the courtly laugh which followed it M. de Bruhl's start of surprise passed unnoticed save by me.

'The husband,' I resumed, 'seeing a stranger descending his staircase, was for stopping him and learning the reason of his presence; but Dromio, whose mind was with Phyllida, refused to stop, and, evading his questions, hurried to the part of the town where the lady had told him she found the velvet knot. Here, sire, at the corner of a lane running between garden-walls, he found a great house, barred and gloomy, and well adapted to the abductor's purpose. Moreover, scanning it on every side, he presently discovered, tied about the bars of an upper window, a knot of white linen, the very counterpart of that velvet one which he bore in his breast. Thus he knew that the nymph was imprisoned in that room!'

'I will make it twenty-five, as I am a good Churchman!' his Majesty exclaimed, dropping the little dog he was nursing into the duchess's lap, and taking out his comfit-box. 'Rambouillet,' he added languidly, 'your friend is a treasure!'

I bowed my acknowledgments, and took occasion as I did so to step a pace aside, so as to command a view of Madame de Bruhl, as well as her husband. Hitherto madame, willing to be accounted a part in so pretty a romance, and ready enough also, unless I was mistaken, to cause her husband a little mild jealousy, had listened to the story with a certain sly demureness. But this I foresaw would not last long; and I felt something like compunction as the moment for striking the blow approached. But I had now no choice. 'The best is yet to come, sire,' I went on, 'as I think you will acknowledge in a moment. Dromio, though he had discovered his mistress, was still in the depths of despair. He wandered round and round the house, seeking ingress and finding none, until at length, sunset approaching, and darkness redoubling his fears for the nymph, fortune took pity on him. As he stood in front of the house he saw the abductor come out, lighted by two servants. Judge of his surprise, sire,' I continued, looking round and speaking slowly, to give full effect to my

words, 'when he recognised in him no other than the husband of the lady who, by picking up and again dropping the velvet knot, had contributed so much to the success of his search!'

'Ha! these husbands!' cried the king. And slapping his knee in an ecstasy at his own acuteness, he laughed in his seat till he rolled again. 'These husbands! Did I not say so?'

The whole Court gave way to like applause, and clapped their hands as well, so that few save those who stood nearest took notice of Madame de Bruhl's faint cry, and still fewer understood why she rose up suddenly from her stool and stood gazing at her husband with burning cheeks and clenched hands. She took no heed of me, much less of the laughing crowd round her, but looked only at him with her soul in her eyes. He, after uttering one hoarse curse, seemed to have no thought for any but me. To have the knowledge that his own wife had baulked him brought home to him in this mocking fashion, to find how little a thing had tripped him that day, to learn how blindly he had played into the hands of fate, above all to be exposed at once to his wife's resentment and the ridicule of the Court—for he could not be sure that I should not the next moment disclose his name—all so wrought on him that for a moment I thought he would strike me in the presence.

His rage, indeed, did what I had not meant to do. For the king, catching sight of his face, and remembering that Madame de Bruhl had elicited the story, screamed suddenly, 'Haro!' and pointed ruthlessly at him with his finger. After that I had no need to speak, the story leaping from eye to eye, and every eye settling on Bruhl, who sought in vain to compose his features. Madame, who surpassed him, as women commonly do surpass men, in self-control, was the first to recover herself, and sitting down as quickly as she had risen, confronted alike her husband and her rivals with a pale smile.

For a moment curiosity and excitement kept all breathless, the eye alone busy. Then the king laughed mis-

chievously. 'Come, M. de Bruhl,' he cried, 'perhaps you will finish the tale for us?' And he threw himself back in his chair, a sneer on his lips.

'Or why not Madame de Bruhl?' said the duchess, with her head on one side and her eyes glittering over her fan. 'Madame would, I am sure, tell it so well.'

But madame only shook her head, smiling always that forced smile. For Bruhl himself, glaring from face to face like a bull about to charge, I have never seen a man more out of countenance, or more completely brought to bay. His discomposure, exposed as he was to the ridicule of all present, was such that the presence in which he stood scarcely hindered him from some violent attack; and his eyes, which had wandered from me at the king's word, presently returning to me again, he so far forgot himself as to raise his hand furiously, uttering at the same time a savage oath.

The king cried out angrily, 'Have a care, sir!' But Bruhl only heeded this so far as to thrust aside those who stood round him and push his way hurriedly through the circle.

'Arnidieu!' cried the king, when he was gone. 'This is fine conduct! I have half a mind to send after him and have him put where his hot blood would cool a little. Or——'

He stopped abruptly, his eyes resting on me. The relative positions of Bruhl and myself as the agents of Rosny and Turenne occurred to him for the first time, I think, and suggested the idea, perhaps, that I had laid a trap for him, and that he had fallen into it. At any rate his face grew darker and darker, and at last, 'A nice kettle of fish this is you have prepared for us, sir!' he muttered, gazing at me gloomily.

The sudden change in his humour took even courtiers by surprise. Faces a moment before broad with smiles grew long again. The less important personages looked uncomfortably at one another, and with one accord frowned on

me. 'If your Majesty would please to hear the end of the story at another time?' I suggested humbly, beginning to wish with all my heart that I had never said a word.

'Chut!' he answered, rising, his face still betraying his perturbation. 'Well, be it so. For the present you may go, sir. Duchess, give me Zizi, and come to my closet. I want you to see my puppies. Retz, my good friend, do you come too. I have something to say to you. Gentlemen, you need not wait. It is likely I shall be late.'

And, with the utmost abruptness, he broke up the circle.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE JACOBIN MONK.

HAD I needed any reminder of the uncertainty of Court favour, or an instance whence I might learn the lesson of modesty, and so stand in less danger of presuming on my new and precarious prosperity, I had it in this episode, and in the demeanour of the company round me. On the circle breaking up in confusion, I found myself the centre of general regard, but regard of so dubious a character, the persons who would have been the first to compliment me had the king retired earlier, standing farthest aloof now, that I felt myself rather insulted than honoured by it. One or two, indeed, of the more cautious spirits did approach me; but it was with the air of men providing against a danger particularly remote, their half-hearted speeches serving only to fix them in my memory as belonging to a class, especially abhorrent to me—the class, I mean, of those who would run at once with the hare and the hounds.

I was rejoiced to find that on one person, and that the one whose disposition towards me was, next to the king's, of first importance, this episode had produced a different impression. Feeling, as I made for the door, a touch on my

arm, I turned to find M. de Rambouillet at my elbow, regarding me with a glance of mingled esteem and amusement; in fine, with a very different look from that which had been my welcome earlier in the evening. I was driven to suppose that he was too great a man, or too sure of his favour with the king, to be swayed by the petty motives which actuated the Court generally, for he laid his hand familiarly on my shoulder, and walked on beside me.

'Well, my friend,' he said,' you have distinguished yourself finely! I do not know that I ever remember a pretty woman making more stir in one evening. But if you are wise you will not go home alone to-night.'

'I have my sword, M. le Marquis,' I answered, somewhat proudly.

'Which will avail you little against a knife in the back!' he retorted drily. 'What attendance have you?'

'My equerry, Simon Fleix, is on the stairs.'

'Good, so far, but not enough,' he replied, as we reached the head of the staircase. 'You had better come home with me now, and two or three of my fellows shall go on to your lodging with you. Do you know, my friend,' he continued, looking at me keenly, 'you are either a very clever or a very foolish man?'

I made answer modestly. 'Neither the one, I fear, nor the other, I hope, sir,' I said.

'Well, you have done a very pertinent thing,' he replied, 'for good or evil. You have let the enemy know what he has to expect, and he is not one, I warn you, to be despised. But whether you have been very wise or very foolish in declaring open war remains to be seen.'

'A week will show,' I answered.

He turned and looked at me. 'You take it coolly,' he said.

'I have been knocking about the world for forty years, marquis,' I rejoined.

He muttered something about Rosny having a good eye, and then stopped to adjust his cloak. We were by this

time in the street. Making me go hand in hand with him, he requested the other gentlemen to draw their swords; and the servants being likewise armed and numbering half a score or more, with pikes and torches, we made up a very formidable party, and caused, I think, more alarm as we passed through the streets to Rambouillet's lodging than we had any reason to feel. Not that we had it all to ourselves, for the attendance at Court that evening being large, and the circle breaking up as I have described more abruptly than usual, the vicinity of the castle was in a ferment, and the streets leading from it were alive with the lights and laughter of parties similar to our own.

At the door of the marquis's lodging I prepared to take leave of him with many expressions of gratitude, but he would have me enter and sit down with him to a light refection, which it was his habit to take before retiring. Two of his gentlemen sat down with us, and a valet, who was in his confidence, waiting on us, we made very merry over the scene in the presence. I learned that M. de Bruhl was far from popular at Court; but being known to possess some kind of hold over the king, and enjoying besides a great reputation for recklessness and skill with the sword, he had played a high part for a length of time, and attached to himself, especially since the death of Guise, a considerable number of followers.

'The truth is,' one of the marquis's gentlemen, who was a little heated with wine, observed, 'there is nothing at this moment which a bold and unscrupulous man may not win in France!'

'Nor a bold and Christian gentleman for France!' replied M. de Rambouillet with some asperity. 'By the way,' he continued, turning abruptly to the servant, 'where is M. François?'

The valet answered that he had not returned with us from the castle. The Marquis expressed himself annoyed at this, and I gathered, firstly, that the missing man was his near kinsman, and, secondly, that he was also the young spark

who had been so forward to quarrel with me earlier in the evening. Determining to refer the matter, should it become pressing, to Rambouillet for adjustment, I took leave of him, and attended by two of his servants, whom he kindly transferred to my service for the present, I started towards my lodging a little before midnight.

The moon had risen while we were at supper, and its light, which whitened the gables on one side of the street, diffused a glimmer below sufficient to enable us to avoid the kennel. Seeing this, I bade the men put out our torch. Frost had set in, and a keen wind was blowing, so that we were glad to hurry on at a good pace; and the streets being quite deserted at this late hour, or haunted only by those who had come to dread the town marshal, we met no one and saw no lights. I fell to thinking, for my part, of the evening I had spent searching Blois for Mademoiselle, and of the difference between then and now. Nor did I fail while on this track to retrace it still farther to the evening of our arrival at my mother's; whence, as a source, such kindly and gentle thoughts welled up in my mind as were natural, and the unfailing affection of that gracious woman required. These, taking the place for the moment of the anxious calculations and stern purposes which had of late engrossed me, were only ousted by something which, happening under my eyes, brought me violently and abruptly to myself.

This was the sudden appearance of three men, who issued one by one from an alley a score of yards in front of us, and after pausing a second to look back the way they had come, flitted on in single file along the street, disappearing, as far as the darkness permitted me to judge, round a second corner. I by no means liked their appearance, and as a scream and the clash of arms rang out next moment from the direction in which they had gone, I cried lustily to Simon Fleix to follow, and ran on, believing from the rascals' movements that they were after no good, but that rather some honest man was like to be sore beset.

On reaching the lane down which they had plunged, however, I paused a moment, considering not so much its blackness, which was intense, the eaves nearly meeting overhead, as the small chance I had of distinguishing between attackers and attacked. But Simon and the men overtaking me, and the sounds of a sharp tussle still continuing, I decided to venture, and plunged into the alley, my left arm well advanced, with the skirt of my cloak thrown over it, and my sword drawn back. I shouted as I ran, thinking that the knaves might desist on hearing me; and this was what happened, for as I arrived on the scene of action—the farther end of the alley—two men took to their heels, while of two who remained, one lay at length in the kennel, and another rose slowly from his knees.

'You are just in time, sir,' the latter said, breathing hard, but speaking with a preciseness which sounded familiar. 'I am obliged to you, sir, whoever you are. The villains had got me down, and in a few minutes more would have made my mother childless. By the way, you have no light, have you?' he continued, lisping like a woman.

One of M. de Rambouillet's men, who had by this time come up, cried out that it was Monsieur François.

'Yes, blockhead!' the young gentleman answered with the utmost coolness. 'But I asked for a light, not for my name.'

'I trust you are not hurt, sir?' I said, putting up my sword.

'Scratched only,' he answered, betraying no surprise on learning who it was had come up so opportunely; as he no doubt did learn from my voice, for he continued with a bow, 'A slight price to pay for the knowledge that M. de Marsac is as forward on the field as on the stairs.'

I bowed my acknowledgments.

'This fellow,' I said, 'is he much hurt?'

'Tut, tut! I thought I had saved the marshal all trouble,' M. François replied. 'Is he not dead, Gil?'

The poor wretch made answer for himself, crying out piteously and in a choking voice, for a priest to shrive him. At that moment Simon Fleix returned with our torch, which he had lighted at the nearest cross-streets, where there was a brazier, and we saw by this light that the man was coughing up blood, and might live perhaps half an hour.

'Mordieu! That comes of thrusting too high!' M. François muttered, regretfully. 'An inch lower, and there would have been none of this trouble! I suppose somebody must fetch one. Gil,' he continued, 'run, man, to the sacristy in the Rue St. Denys, and get a Father. Or—stay! Help to lift him under the lee of the wall there. The wind cuts like a knife here.'

The street being on the slope of the hill, the lower part of the house nearest us stood a few feet from the ground, on wooden piles, and the space underneath it, being enclosed at the back and sides, was used as a cart-house. The servants moved the dying man into this rude shelter, and I accompanied them, being unwilling to leave the young gentleman alone. Not wishing, however, to seem to interfere, I walked to the farther end, and sat down on the shaft of a cart, whence I idly admired the strange aspect of the group I had left, as the glare of the torch brought now one and now another into prominence, and sometimes shone on M. François' jewelled fingers toying with his tiny moustache, and sometimes on the writhing features of the man at his feet.

On a sudden, and before Gil had started on his errand, I saw there was a priest among them. I had not seen him enter, nor had I any idea whence he came. My first impression was only that here was a priest, and that he was looking at me—not at the man craving his assistance on the floor, or at those who stood round him, but at me, who sat away in the shadow beyond the ring of light!

This was surprising; but a second glance explained it, for then I saw that he was the Jacobin monk who had

haunted my mother's dying hours. And, amazed as much at this strange *rencontre* as at the man's boldness, I sprang up and strode forwards, forgetting, in an impulse of righteous anger, the office he came to do. And this the more as his face, still turned to me, seemed instinct to my eyes with triumphant malice. As I moved towards him, however, with a fierce exclamation on my lips, he suddenly dropped his eyes and knelt. Immediately M. François cried 'Hush!' and the men turned to me with scandalised faces. I fell back. Yet even then, whispering on his knees by the dying man, the knave was thinking, I felt sure, of me, glorying at once in his immunity and the power it gave him to tantalise me without fear.

I determined, whatever the result, to intercept him when all was over; and on the man dying a few minutes later, I walked resolutely to the open side of the shed, thinking it likely he might try to slip away as mysteriously as he had come. He stood a moment speaking to M. François, however, and then, accompanied by him, advanced boldly to meet me, a lean smile on his face.

'Father Antoine,' M. d'Agen said politely, 'tells me that he knows you, M. de Marsac, and desires to speak to you, *mal-à-propos* as is the occasion.'

'And I to him,' I answered, trembling with rage, and only restraining by an effort the impulse which would have had me dash my hand in the priest's pale, smirking face. 'I have waited long for this moment,' I continued, eyeing him steadily, as M. François withdrew out of hearing, 'and had you tried to avoid me, I would have dragged you back, though all your tribe were here to protect you.'

His presence so maddened me that I scarcely knew what I said. I felt my breath come quickly, I felt the blood surge to my head, and it was with difficulty I restrained myself when he answered with well-affected sanctity, 'Like mother, like son, I fear, sir. Huguenots both.'

I choked with rage. 'What!' I said, 'you dare to threaten me as you threatened my mother? Fool! know

that only to-day for the purpose of discovering and punishing you I took the rooms in which my mother died.'

'I know it,' he answered quietly. And then in a second, as by magic, he altered his demeanour completely, raising his head and looking me in the face. 'That, and so much besides, I know,' he continued, giving me, to my astonishment, frown for frown, 'that if you will listen to me for a moment, M. de Marsac, and listen quietly, I will convince you that the folly is not on my side.'

Amazed at his new manner, in which there was none of the madness that had marked him at our first meeting, but a strange air of authority, unlike anything I had associated with him before, I signed to him to proceed.

'You think that I am in your power?' he said, smiling.

'I think,' I retorted swiftly, 'that, escaping me now, you will have at your heels henceforth a worse enemy than even your own sins.'

'Just so,' he answered, nodding. 'Well, I am going to show you that the reverse is the case; and that you are as completely in my hands, to spare or to break, as this straw. In the first place, you are here in Blois, a Huguenot!'

'Chut!' I exclaimed contemptuously, affecting a confidence I was far from feeling. 'A little while back that might have availed you. But we are in Blois, not Paris. It is not far to the Loire, and you have to deal with a man now, not with a woman. It is you who have cause to tremble, not I.'

'You think to be protected,' he answered with a sour smile, 'even on this side of the Loire, I see. But one word to the Pope's Legate, or to the Duke of Nevers, and you would see the inside of a dungeon, if not worse. For the king——'

'King or no king!' I answered, interrupting him with more assurance than I felt, seeing that I remembered only too well Henry's remark that Rosny must not look to him for protection, 'I fear you not a whit! And that reminds me. I have heard you talk treason—rank, black treason,

priest, as ever sent man to rope, and I will give you up. By heaven I will!' I cried, my rage increasing, as I discerned, more and more clearly, the dangerous hold he had over me. 'You have threatened me! One word, and I will send you to the gallows!'

'Sh!' he answered, indicating M. François by a gesture of the hand. 'For your own sake, not mine. This is fine talking, but you have not yet heard all I know. Would you like to hear how you have spent the last month? Two days after Christmas, M. de Marsac, you left Chizé with a young lady—I can give you her name, if you please. Four days afterwards you reached Blois, and took her to your mother's lodging. Next morning she left you for M. de Bruhl. Two days later you tracked her to a house in the Ruelle d'Arcy, and freed her, but lost her in the moment of victory. Then you stayed in Blois until your mother's death, going a day or two later to M. de Rosny's house by Mantes, where mademoiselle still is. Yesterday you arrived in Blois with M. de Rosny; you went to his lodging; you——'

'Proceed, sir,' I muttered, leaning forward. Under cover of my cloak I drew my dagger half-way from its sheath. 'Proceed, sir, I pray,' I repeated with dry lips.

'You slept there,' he continued, holding his ground, but shuddering slightly, either from cold or because he perceived my movement and read my design in my eyes. 'This morning you remained here in attendance on M. de Rambouillet.'

For the moment I breathed freely again, perceiving that though he knew much, the one thing on which M. de Rosny's design turned had escaped him. The secret interview with the king, which compromised alike Henry himself and M. de Rambouillet, had apparently passed unnoticed and unsuspected. With a sigh of intense relief I slid back the dagger, which I had fully made up my mind to use had he known all, and drew my cloak round me with a shrug of feigned indifference. I sweated to think what he did know, but our interview with the king having escaped him, I breathed again.

'Well, sir,' I said curtly, 'I have listened. And now, what is the purpose of all this?'

'My purpose?' he answered, his eyes glittering. 'To show you that you are in my power. You are the agent of M. de Rosny. I, the agent, however humble, of the Holy Catholic League. Of your movements I know all. What do you know of mine?'

'Knowledge,' I made grim answer, 'is not everything, sir priest.'

'It is more than it was,' he said, smiling his thin-lipped smile. 'It is going to be more than it is. And I know much—about you, M. de Marsac.'

'You know too much!' I retorted, feeling his covert threats close round me like the folds of some great serpent. 'But you are imprudent, I think. Will you tell me what is to prevent me striking you through where you stand, and ridding myself at a blow of so much knowledge?'

'The presence of three men, M. de Marsac,' he answered lightly, waving his hand towards M. François and the others, 'every one of whom would give you up to justice. You forget that you are north of the Loire, and that priests are not to be massacred here with impunity, as in your lawless south-country. However, enough. The night is cold, and M. d'Agen grows suspicious as well as impatient. We have, perhaps, spoken too long already. Permit me' —he bowed and drew back a step—'to resume this discussion to-morrow.'

Despite his politeness and the hollow civility with which he thus sought to close the interview, the light of triumph which shone in his eyes, as the glare of the torch fell athwart them, no less than the assured tone of his voice, told me clearly that he knew his power. He seemed, indeed, transformed: no longer a slinking, peaceful clerk, preying on a woman's fears, but a bold and crafty schemer, skilled and unscrupulous, possessed of hidden knowledge and hidden resources; the personification of evil intellect. For a moment, knowing all I knew, and particularly the

responsibilities which lay before me, and the interests committed to my hands, I quailed, confessing myself unequal to him. I forgot the righteous vengeance I owed him; I cried out helplessly against the ill-fortune which had brought him across my path. I saw myself enmeshed and fettered beyond hope of escape, and by an effort only controlled the despair I felt.

'To-morrow?' I muttered hoarsely. 'At what time?'

He shook his head with a cunning smile. 'A thousand thanks, but I will settle that myself!' he answered. 'Au revoir!' And muttering a word of leave-taking to M. François d'Agen, he blessed the two servants, and went out into the night.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE OFFER OF THE LEAGUE.

When the last sound of his footsteps died away, I awoke as from an evil dream, and becoming conscious of the presence of M. François and the servants, recollected mechanically that I owed the former an apology for my discourtesy in keeping him standing in the cold. I began to offer it; but my distress and confusion of mind were such that in the middle of a set phrase I broke off, and stood looking fixedly at him, my trouble so plain that he asked me civilly if anything ailed me.

'No,' I answered, turning from him impatiently; 'nothing, nothing, sir. Or tell me,' I continued, with an abrupt change of mind, 'who is that who has just left us?'

'Father Antoine, do you mean?'

'Ay, Father Antoine, Father Judas, call him what you like,' I rejoined bitterly

'Then if you leave the choice to me,' M. François answered with grave politeness, 'I would rather call him something more pleasant, M. de Marsac—James or John,

let us say. For there is little said here which does not come back to him. If walls have ears, the walls of Blois are in his pay. But I thought you knew him,' he continued. 'He is secretary, confidant, chaplain, what you will, to Cardinal Retz, and one of those whom—in your ear—greater men court and more powerful men lean on. If I had to choose between them, I would rather cross M. de Crillon.'

'I am obliged to you,' I muttered, checked as much by his manner as his words.

'Not at all,' he answered more lightly. 'Any information I have is at your disposal.'

However, I saw the imprudence of venturing farther, and hastened to take leave of him, persuading him to allow one of M. de Rambouillet's servants to accompany him home. He said that he should call on me in the morning; and forcing myself to answer him in a suitable manner, I saw him depart one way, and myself, accompanied by Simon Fleix, went off another. My feet were frozen with long standing—I think the corpse we left was scarce colder—but my head was hot with feverish doubts and fears. The moon had sunk and the streets were dark. Our torch had burned out, and we had no light. But where my followers saw only blackness and vacancy, I saw an evil smile and a lean visage fraught with menace and exultation.

For the more closely I directed my mind to the position in which I stood, the graver it seemed. Pitted against Bruhl alone, amid strange surroundings and in an atmosphere of Court intrigue, I had thought my task sufficiently difficult and the disadvantages under which I laboured sufficiently serious before this interview. Conscious of a certain rustiness and a distaste for finesse, with resources so inferior to Bruhl's that even M. de Rosny's liberality had not done much to make up the difference, I had accepted the post offered me rather readily than sanguinely; with joy, seeing that it held out the hope of high reward, but with no certain expectation of success. Still, matched with a man of violent and headstrong character, I had seen

no reason to despair; nor any why I might not arrange the secret meeting between the king and mademoiselle with safety, and conduct to its end an intrigue simple and unsuspected, and requiring for its execution rather courage and caution than address or experience.

Now, however, I found that Bruhl was not my only or my most dangerous antagonist. Another was in the field—or, to speak more correctly, was waiting outside the arena, ready to snatch the prize when we should have disabled one another. From a dream of Bruhl and myself as engaged in a competition for the king's favour, wherein neither could expose the other nor appeal even in the last resort to the joint-enemies of his Majesty and ourselves, I awoke to a very different state of things; I awoke to find those enemies the masters of the situation, possessed of the clue to our plans, and permitting them only as long as they seemed to threaten no serious peril to themselves.

No discovery could be more mortifying or more fraught with terror. The perspiration stood on my brow as I recalled the warning which M. de Rosny had uttered against Cardinal Retz, or noted down the various points of knowledge which were in Father Antoine's possession. He knew every event of the last month, with one exception, and could tell, I verily believed, how many crowns I had in my pouch. Conceding this, and the secret sources of information he must possess, what hope had I of keeping my future movements from him? Mademoiselle's arrival would be known to him before she had well passed the gates; nor was it likely, or even possible, that I should again succeed in reaching the king's presence untraced and unsuspected. In fine, I saw myself, equally with Bruhl, a puppet in this man's hands, my goings out and my comings in watched and reported to him, his mercy the only bar between myself and destruction. At any moment I might be arrested as a Huguenot, the enterprise in which I was engaged ruined, and Mademoiselle de la Vire exposed to the violence of Bruhl or the equally dangerous intrigues of the League.

Under these circumstances I fancied sleep impossible; but habit and weariness are strong persuaders, and when I reached my lodging I slept long and soundly, as became a man who had looked danger in the face more than once. The morning light too brought an accession both of courage and hope. I reflected on the misery of my condition at St. Jean d'Angely, without friends or resources, and driven to herd with such a man as Fresnoy. And telling myself that the gold crowns which M. de Rosny had lavished upon me were not for nothing, nor the more precious friendship with which he had honoured me a gift that called for no return, I rose with new spirit and a countenance which threw Simon Fleix—who had seen me lie down the picture of despair—into the utmost astonishment.

'You have had good dreams,' he said, eyeing me jealously and with a disturbed air.

'I had a very evil one last night,' I answered lightly, wondering a little why he looked at me so, and why he seemed to resent my return to hopefulness and courage. I might have followed this train of thought farther with advantage, since I possessed a clue to his state of mind; but at that moment a summons at the door called him away to it, and he presently ushered in M. d'Agen, who, saluting me with punctilious politeness, had not said fifty words before he introduced the subject of his toe—no longer, however, in a hostile spirit, but as the happy medium which had led him to recognise the worth and sterling qualities—so he was pleased to say—of his preserver.

I was delighted to find him in this frame of mind, and told him frankly that the friendship with which his kinsman, M. de Rambouillet, honoured me would prevent me giving him satisfaction save in the last resort. He replied that the service I had done him was such as to render this immaterial, unless I had myself cause of offence; which I was forward to deny.

We were paying one another compliments after this fashion, while I regarded him with the interest which the

middle-aged bestow on the young and gallant in whom they see their own youth and hopes mirrored, when the door was again opened, and after a moment's pause admitted, equally, I think, to the disgust of M. François and myself, the form of Father Antoine.

Seldom have two men more diverse stood, I believe, in a room together; seldom has any greater contrast been presented to a man's eyes than that opened to mine on this occasion. On the one side the gay young spark, with his short cloak, his fine suit of black-and-silver, his trim limbs and jewelled hilt and chased comfit-box; on the other, the tall, stooping monk, lean-jawed and bright-eyed, whose gown hung about him in coarse, ungainly folds. And M. François' sentiment on first seeing the other was certainly dislike. In spite of this, however, he bestowed a greeting on the new-comer which evidenced a secret awe, and in other ways showed so plain a desire to please that I felt my fears of the priest return in force. I reflected that the talents which in such a garb could win the respect of M. François d'Agen—a brilliant star among the younger courtiers, and one of a class much given to thinking scorn of their fathers' roughness—must be both great and formidable; and, so considering, I received the monk with a distant courtesy which I had once little thought to extend to him. I put aside for the moment the private grudge I bore him with so much justice, and remembered only the burden which lay on me in my contest with him.

I conjectured without difficulty that he chose to come at this time, when M. François was with me, out of a cunning regard to his own safety; and I was not surprised when M. François, beginning to make his adieux, Father Antoine begged him to wait below, adding that he had something of importance to communicate. He advanced his request in terms of politeness bordering on humility; but I could clearly see that, in assenting to it, M. d'Agen bowed to a will stronger than his own, and would, had he dared to follow his own bent, have given a very different answer.

As it was he retired—nominally to give an order to his lackey—with a species of impatient self-restraint which it was not difficult to construe.

Left alone with me, and assured that we had no listeners, the monk was not slow in coming to the point.

'You have thought over what I told you last night?' he said brusquely, dropping in a moment the suave manner which he had maintained in M. François's presence.

I replied coldly that I had.

'And you understand the position?' he continued quickly, looking at me from under his brows as he stood before me, with one clenched fist on the table. 'Or shall I tell you more? Shall I tell you how poor and despised you were some weeks ago, M. de Marsac—you who now go in velvet, and have three men at your back? Or whose gold it is has brought you here, and made you this? Chut! Do not let us trifle. You are here as the secret agent of the King of Navarre. It is my business to learn your plans and his intentions, and I propose to do so.'

'Well?' I said.

'I am prepared to buy them,' he answered; and his eyes sparkled as he spoke, with a greed which set me yet more on my guard.

'For whom?' I asked. Having made up my mind that I must use the same weapons as my adversary, I reflected that to express indignation, such as might become a young man new to the world, could help me not a whit. 'For whom?' I repeated, seeing that he hesitated.

'That is my business,' he replied slowly.

'You want to know too much and tell too little,' I retorted, yawning.

'And you are playing with me,' he cried, looking at me suddenly, with so piercing a gaze and so dark a countenance that I checked a shudder with difficulty. 'So much the worse for you, so much the worse for you!' he continued fiercely. 'I am here to buy the information you hold, but if you will not sell, there is another way. At an hour's

notice I can ruin your plans, and send you to a dungeon! You are like a fish caught in a net not yet drawn. It thrusts its nose this way and that, and touches the mesh, but is slow to take the alarm until the net is drawn—and then it is too late. So it is with you, and so it is,' he added, falling into the ecstatic mood which marked him at times, and left me in doubt whether he were all knave or in part enthusiast, 'with all those who set themselves against St. Peter and his Church!'

'I have heard you say much the same of the King of France,' I said derisively.

'You trust in him?' he retorted, his eyes gleaming. 'You have been up there, and seen his crowded chamber, and counted his forty-five gentlemen and his grey-coated Swiss? I tell you the splendour you saw was a dream, and will vanish as a dream. The man's strength and his glory shall go from him, and that soon. Have you no eyes to see that he is beside the question? There are but two powers in France—the Holy Union, which still prevails, and the accursed Huguenot; and between them is the battle.'

'Now you are telling me more,' I said.

He grew sober in a moment, looking at me with a vicious anger hard to describe.

'Tut tut,' he said, showing his yellow teeth, 'the dead tell no tales. And for Henry of Valois, he so loves a monk that you might better accuse his mistress. But for you, I have only to cry "Ho! a Huguenot and a spy!" and though he loved you more than he loved Quélus or Maugiron, he dare not stretch out a finger to save you!'

I knew that he spoke the truth, and with difficulty maintained the air of indifference with which I had entered on the interview.

'But what if I leave Blois?' I ventured, merely to see what he would say.

He laughed. 'You cannot,' he answered. 'The net is round you, M. de Marsac, and there are those at every gate who know you and have their instructions. I can destroy

you, but I would fain have your information, and for that I will pay you five hundred crowns and let you go.'

'To fall into the hands of the King of Navarre?'

'He will disown you, in any case,' he answered eagerly. 'He had that in his mind, my friend, when he selected an agent so obscure. He will disown you. Ah, mon Dieu! had I been an hour quicker I had caught Rosny—Rosny himself!'

'There is one thing lacking still,' I replied. 'How am I to be sure that, when I have told you what I know, you will pay me the money or let me go?'

'I will swear to it!' he answered earnestly, deceived into thinking I was about to surrender. 'I will give you my oath, M. de Marsac!'

'I would as soon have your shoe-lace!' I exclaimed, the indignation I could not entirely repress finding vent in that phrase. 'A Churchman's vow is worth a candle—or a candle and a half, is it?' I continued ironically. 'I must have some security a great deal more substantial than that, father.'

'What?' he asked, looking at me gloomily.

Seeing an opening, I cudgelled my brains to think of any condition which, being fulfilled, might turn the table on him and place him in my power. But his position was so strong, or my wits so weak, that nothing occurred to me at the time, and I sat looking at him, my mind gradually passing from the possibility of escape to the actual danger in which I stood, and which encompassed also Simon Fleix, and, in a degree, doubtless, M. de Rambouillet. In four or five days, too, Mademoiselle de la Vire would arrive. I wondered if I could send any warning to her; and then, again, I doubted the wisdom of interfering with M. de Rosny's plans, the more as Maignan, who had gone to fetch mademoiselle, was of a kind to disregard any orders save his master's.

'Well!' said the monk, impatiently recalling me to myself, 'what security do you want?'

'I am not quite sure at this moment,' I made answer slowly. 'I am in a difficult position. I must have some time to consider.'

'And to rid yourself of me, if it be possible,' he said with irony. 'I quite understand. But I warn you that you are watched; and that wherever you go and whatever you do, eyes which are mine are upon you.'

'I, too, understand,' I said coolly.

He stood awhile uncertain, regarding me with mingled doubt and malevolence, tortured on the one hand by fear of losing the prize if he granted delay, on the other of failing as utterly if he exerted his power and did not succeed in subduing my resolution. I watched him, too, and gauging his eagerness and the value of the stake for which he was striving by the strength of his emotions, drew small comfort from the sight. More than once it had occurred to me, and now it occurred to me again, to extricate myself by a blow. But a natural reluctance to strike an unarmed man, however vile and knavish, and the belief that he had not trusted himself in my power without taking the fullest precautions, withheld me. When he grudgingly, and with many dark threats, proposed to wait three days—and not an hour more—for my answer, I accepted; for I saw no other alternative open. And on these terms, but not without some short discussion, we parted, and I heard his stealthy footstep go sneaking down the stairs.

CHAPTER XIX.

MEN CALL IT CHANCE.

If I were telling more than the truth, or had it in my mind to embellish my adventures, I could, doubtless, by the exercise of a little ingenuity make it appear that I owed my escape from Father Antoine's meshes to my own craft;

and tell, in fine, as pretty a story of plots and counterplots as M. de Brantôme has ever woven. Having no desire, however, to magnify myself, and, at this time of day, scarcely any reason, I am fain to confess that the reverse was the case; and that while no man ever did less to free himself than I did, my adversary retained his grasp to the end, and had surely, but for a strange interposition, effected my ruin. How relief came, and from what quarter, I might defy the most ingenious person, after reading my memoirs to this point, to say; and this not so much by reason of any subtle device, as because the hand of Providence was for once directly manifest.

The three days of grace which the priest had granted I passed in anxious but futile search for some means of escape, every plan I conceived dying stillborn, and not the least of my miseries lying in the fact that I could discern no better course than still to sit and think, and seemed doomed to perpetual inaction. M. de Rambouillet being a strict Catholic, though in all other respects a patriotic man, I knew better than to have recourse to him; and the priest's influence over M. d'Agen I had myself witnessed. For similar reasons I rejected the idea of applying to the king; and this exhausting the list of those on whom I had any claim, I found myself thrown on my own resources, which seemed limited—my wits failing me at this pinch—to my sword and Simon Fleix.

Assured that I must break out of Blois if I would save, not myself only, but others more precious because entrusted to my charge, I thought it no disgrace to appeal to Simon; describing in a lively fashion the danger which threatened us, and inciting the lad by every argument which I thought likely to have weight with him to devise some way of escape.

'Now is the time, my friend,' I said, 'to show your wits, and prove that M. de Rosny, who said you had a cunning above the ordinary, was right. If your brain can ever save your head, now is the time! For I tell you plainly, if you

cannot find some way to outmanœuvre this villain before to-morrow, I am spent. You can judge for yourself what chance you will have of going free.'

I paused at that, waiting for him to make some suggestion. To my chagrin he remained silent, leaning his head on his hand, and studying the table with his eyes in a sullen fashion; so that I began to regret the condescension I had evinced in letting him be seated, and found it necessary to remind him that he had taken service with me, and must do my bidding.

'Well,' he said morosely, and without looking up, 'I am ready to do it. But I do not like priests, and this one least of all. I know him, and I will not meddle with him!'

'You will not meddle with him?' I cried, almost beside myself with dismay.

'No, I won't,' he replied, retaining his listless attitude. 'I know him, and I am afraid of him. I am no match for him.'

'Then M. de Rosny was wrong, was he?' I said, giving way to my anger.

'If it please you,' he answered pertly.

This was too much for me. My riding-switch lay handy, and I snatched it up. Before he knew what I would be at, I fell upon him, and gave him such a sound wholesome drubbing as speedily brought him to his senses. When he cried for mercy—which he did not for a good space, being still possessed by the peevish devil which had ridden him ever since his departure from Rosny— I put it to him again whether M. de Rosny was not right. When he at last admitted this, but not till then, I threw the whip away and let him go, but did not cease to reproach him as he deserved.

'Did you think,' I said, 'that I was going to be ruined because you would not use your lazy brains? That I was going to sit still, and let you sulk, while mademoiselle walked blindfold into the toils? Not at all, my friend!'

'Mademoiselle!' he exclaimed, looking at me with a sudden change of countenance, and ceasing to rub himself

and scowl, as he had been doing. 'She is not here, and is in no danger.'

'She will be here to-morrow, or the next day,' I said.

'You did not tell me that!' he replied, his eyes glittering. 'Does Father Antoine know it?'

'He will know it the moment she enters the town,' I answered.

Noting the change which the introduction of mademoiselle's name into the affair had wrought in him, I felt something like humiliation. But at the moment I had no choice; it was my business to use such instruments as came to my hand, and not, mademoiselle's safety being at stake, to pick and choose too nicely. In a few minutes our positions were reversed. The lad had grown as hot as I cold, as keenly excited as I critical. When he presently came to a stand in front of me, I saw a strange likeness between his face and the priest's; nor was I astonished when he presently made just such a proposal as I should have expected from Father Antoine himself.

'There is only one thing for it,' he muttered, trembling all over. 'He must be got rid of!'

'Fine talking!' I said, contemptuously. 'If he were a soldier he might be brought to it. But he is a priest, my friend, and does not fight.'

'Fight? Who wants him to fight?' the lad answered, his face dark, his hands moving restlessly. 'It is the easier done. A blow in the back, and he will trouble us no more.'

'Who is to strike it?' I asked drily.

Simon trembled and hesitated; but presently, heaving a deep sigh, he said, 'I will.'

'It might not be difficult,' I muttered, thinking it over.

'It would be easy,' he answered under his breath. His eyes shone, his lips were white, and his long dark hair hung wet over his forehead.

I reflected; and the longer I did so the more feasible seemed the suggestion. A single word, and I might sweep

from my path the man whose existence threatened mine; who would not meet me fairly, but, working against me darkly and treacherously, deserved no better treatment at my hands than that which a detected spy receives. He had wronged my mother; he would fain destroy my friends!

And, doubtless, I shall be blamed by some and ridiculed by more for indulging in scruples at such a time. But I have all my life long been prejudiced against that form of underhand violence which I have heard old men contend came into fashion in our country in modern times, and which certainly seems to be alien from the French character. Without judging others too harshly, or saying that the poniard is never excusable—for then might some wrongs done to women and the helpless go without remedy—I have set my face against its use as unworthy of a soldier. At the time, moreover, of which I am now writing the extent to which our enemies had lately resorted to it tended to fix this feeling with peculiar firmness in my mind; and, but for the very desperate dilemma in which I stood at the moment—and not I alone—I do not think that I should have entertained Simon's proposal for a minute.

As it was, I presently answered him in a way which left him in no doubt of my sentiments. 'Simon, my friend,' I said—and I remember I was a little moved—'you have something still to learn, both as a soldier and a Huguenot. Neither the one nor the other strikes at the back.'

'But if he will not fight?' the lad retorted rebelliously. 'What then?'

It was so clear that our adversary gained an unfair advantage in this way that I could not answer the question. I let it pass, therefore, and merely repeating my former injunction, bade Simon think out another way.

He promised reluctantly to do so, and, after spending some moments in thought, went out to learn whether the house was being watched.

When he returned, his countenance wore so new an expression that I saw at once that something had happened. He did

not meet my eye, however, and did not explain, but made as if he would go out again, with something of confusion in his manner. Before finally disappearing, however, he seemed to change his mind once more; for, marching up to me where I stood eyeing him with the utmost astonishment, he stopped before me, and suddenly drawing out his hand, thrust something into mine.

'What is it, man?' I said mechanically.

'Look!' he answered rudely, breaking silence for the first time. 'You should know. Why ask me? What have I to do with it?'

I looked then, and saw that he had given me a knot of velvet precisely similar in shape, size, and material to that well-remembered one which had aided me so opportunely in my search for mademoiselle. This differed from that a little in colour, but in nothing else, the fashion of the bow being the same, and one lappet bearing the initials 'C. d. l. V.,' while the other had the words, 'A moi.' I gazed at it in wonder. 'But, Simon,' I said, 'what does it mean? Where did you get it?'

'Where should I get it?' he answered jealously. Then, seeming to recollect himself, he changed his tone. 'A woman gave it to me in the street,' he said.

I asked him what woman.

'How should I know?' he answered, his eyes gleaming with anger. 'It was a woman in a mask.'

'Was it Fanchette?' I said sternly.

'It might have been. I do not know,' he responded.

I concluded at first that mademoiselle and her escort had arrived in the outskirts of the city, and that Maignan had justified his reputation for discretion by sending in to learn from me whether the way was clear before he entered. In this notion I was partly confirmed and partly shaken by the accompanying message; which Simon, from whom every scrap of information had to be dragged as blood from a stone, presently delivered.

'You are to meet the sender half an hour after sunset

to-morrow evening,' he said, 'on the Parvis at the north-east corner of the cathedral.'

'To-morrow evening?'

'Yes, when else?' the lad answered ungraciously. 'I said to-morrow evening.'

I thought this strange. I could understand why Maignan should prefer to keep his charge outside the walls until he heard from me, but not why he should postpone a meeting so long. The message, too, seemed unnecessarily meagre, and I began to think Simon was still withholding something.

'Was that all?' I asked him.

'Yes, all,' he answered, 'except——'

'Except what?' I said sternly.

'Except that the woman showed me the gold token Mademoiselle de la Vire used to carry,' he answered reluctantly, 'and said, if you wanted further assurance that would satisfy you.'

'Did you see the coin?' I cried eagerly.

'To be sure,' he answered.

'Then, mon dieu!' I retorted, 'either you are deceiving me, or the woman you saw deceived you. For mademoiselle has not got the token! I have it; here, in my possession! Now, do you still say you saw it, man?'

'I saw one like it,' he answered, trembling, his face damp. 'That I will swear. And the woman told me what I have told you. And no more.'

'Then it is clear,' I answered, 'that mademoiselle has nothing to do with this, and is doubtless many a league away. This is one of M. de Bruhl's tricks. Fresnoy gave him the token he stole from me. And I told him the story of the velvet knot myself. This is a trap; and had I fallen into it, and gone to the Parvis to-morrow evening, I had never kept another assignation, my lad.'

Simon looked thoughtful. Presently he said, with a crestfallen air, 'You were to go alone. The woman said that.'

Though I knew well why he had suppressed this item, I forbore to blame him. 'What was the woman like?' I said.

'She had very much of Fanchette's figure,' he answered. He could not go beyond that. Blinded by the idea that the woman was mademoiselle's attendant, and no one else, he had taken little heed of her, and could not even say for certain that she was not a man in woman's clothes.

I thought the matter over and discussed it with him; and was heartily minded to punish M. de Bruhl, if I could discover a way of turning his treacherous plot against himself. But the lack of any precise knowledge of his plans prevented me stirring in the matter; the more as I felt no certainty that I should be master of my actions when the time came.

Strange to say the discovery of this movement on the part of Bruhl, who had sedulously kept himself in the background since the scene in the king's presence, far from increasing my anxieties, had the effect of administering a fillip to my spirits; which the cold and unyielding pressure of the Jacobin had reduced to a low point. Here was something I could understand, resist, and guard against. The feeling that I had once more to do with a man of like aims and passions with myself quickly restored me to the use of my faculties; as I have heard that a swordsman opposed to the powers of evil regains his vigour on finding himself engaged with a mortal foe. Though I knew that the hours of grace were fast running to a close, and that on the morrow the priest would call for an answer, I experienced that evening an unreasonable lightness and cheerfulness. I retired to rest with confidence, and slept in comfort, supported in part, perhaps, by the assurance that in that room where my mother died her persecutor could have no power to harm me.

Upon Simon Fleix, on the other hand, the discovery that Bruhl was moving, and that consequently peril threatened us from a new quarter, had a different effect. He fell into a state of extreme excitement, and spent the evening and a great part of the night in walking restlessly up and down the room, wrestling with the fears and anxieties which beset

us, and now talking fast to himself, now biting his nails in an agony of impatience. In vain I adjured him not to meet troubles halfway; or, pointing to the pallet which he occupied at the foot of my couch, bade him, if he could not devise a way of escape, at least to let the matter rest until morning. He had no power to obey, but, tortured by the vivid anticipations which it was his nature to entertain, he continued to ramble to and fro in a fever of the nerves, and had no sooner lain down than he was up again. Remembering, however, how well he had borne himself on the night of mademoiselle's escape from Blois, I refrained from calling him a coward; and contented myself instead with the reflection that nothing sits worse on a fighting-man than too much knowledge—except, perhaps, a lively imagination.

I thought it possible that mademoiselle might arrive next day before Father Antoine called to receive his answer. In this event I hoped to have the support of Maignan's experience. But the party did not arrive. I had to rely on myself and my own resources, and, this being so, determined to refuse the priest's offer, but in all other things to be guided by circumstances.

About noon he came, attended, as was his practice, by two friends, whom he left outside. He looked paler and more shadowy than before, I thought, his hands thinner, and his cheeks more transparent. I could draw no good augury, however, from these signs of frailty, for the brightness of his eyes and the unusual elation of his manner told plainly of a spirit assured of the mastery. He entered the room with an air of confidence, and addressed me in a tone of patronage which left me in no doubt of his intentions; the frankness with which he now laid bare his plans going far to prove that already he considered me no better than his tool.

I did not at once undeceive him, but allowed him to proceed, and even to bring out the five hundred crowns which he had promised me, and the sight of which he doubtless supposed would clench the matter.

Seeing this he became still less reticent, and spoke so largely that I presently felt myself impelled to ask him if he would answer a question.

'That is as may be, M. de Marsac,' he answered lightly. 'You may ask it.'

'You hint at great schemes which you have in hand, father,' I said. 'You speak of France and Spain and Navarre, and kings and Leagues and cardinals! You talk of secret strings, and would have me believe that if I comply with your wishes I shall find you as powerful a patron as M. de Rosny. But—one moment, if you please,' I continued hastily, seeing that he was about to interrupt me with such eager assurances as I had already heard; 'tell me this. With so many irons in the fire, why did you interfere with one old gentlewoman—for the sake of a few crowns?'

'I will tell you even that,' he answered, his face flushing at my tone. 'Have you ever heard of an elephant? Yes. Well, it has a trunk, you know, with which it can either drag an oak from the earth or lift a groat from the ground. It is so with me. But again you ask,' he continued with an airy grimace, 'why I wanted a few crowns. Enough that I did. There are going to be two things in the world, and two only, M. de Marsac: brains and money. The former I have, and had: the latter I needed—and took.'

'Money and brains?' I said, looking at him thoughtfully.

'Yes,' he answered, his eyes sparkling, his thin nostrils beginning to dilate. 'Give me these two, and I will rule France!'

'You will rule France?' I exclaimed, amazed beyond measure by his audacity. 'You, man?'

'Yes, I,' he answered, with abominable coolness. 'I, priest, monk, Churchman, clerk. You look surprised, but mark you, sir, there is a change going on. Our time is coming, and yours is going. What hampers our lord the king and shuts him up in Blois, while rebellions stalk through France? Lack of men? No; but lack of money.

Who can get the money for him—you the soldier, or I the clerk? A thousand times, I! Therefore, my time is coming, and before you die you will see a priest rule France.'

'God forbid it should be you,' I answered scornfully.

'As you please,' he answered, shrugging his shoulders, and assuming in a breath a mask of humility which sat as ill on his monstrous conceit as ever nun's veil on a trooper. 'Yet it may even be I; by the favour of the Holy Catholic Church, whose humble minister I am.'

I sprang up with a great oath at that, having no stomach for more of the strange transformations, in which this man delighted, and whereof the last had ever the air of being the most hateful. 'You villain!' I cried, twisting my moustaches, a habit I have when enraged. 'And so you would make me a stepping-stone to your greatness. You would bribe me—a soldier and a gentleman. Go, before I do you a mischief. That is all I have to say to you. Go! You have your answer. I will tell you nothing—not a jot or a tittle. Begone from my room!'

He fell back a step in his surprise, and stood against the table biting his nails and scowling at me, fear and chagrin contending with half a dozen devils for the possession of his face. 'So you have been deceiving me,' he said slowly, and at last.

'I have let you deceive yourself,' I answered, looking at him with scorn, but with none of the fear with which he had for a while inspired me. 'Begone, and do your worst.'

'You know what you are doing,' he said. 'I have that will hang you, M. de Marsac—or worse.'

'Go!' I cried.

'You have thought of your friends,' he continued mockingly.

'Go!' I said.

'Of Mademoiselle de la Vire, if by any chance she fall into my hands? It will not be hanging for her. You remember the two Foucauds?'—and he laughed.

The vile threat, which I knew he had used to my mother, so worked upon me that I strode forward unable to control myself longer. In another moment I had certainly taken him by the throat and squeezed the life out of his miserable carcase, had not Providence in its goodness intervened to save me. The door, on which he had already laid his hand in terror, opened suddenly. It admitted Simon, who, closing it behind him, stood looking from one to the other of us in nervous doubt; divided between that respect for the priest which a training at the Sorbonne had instilled into him, and the rage which despair arouses in the weakest.

His presence, while it checked me in my purpose, seemed to give Father Antoine courage, for the priest stood his ground, and even turned to me a second time, his face dark with spite and disappointment. 'Good,' he said hoarsely. 'Destroy yourself if you will! I advise you to bar your door, for in an hour the guards will be here to fetch you to the question.'

Simon cried out at the threat, so that I turned and looked at the lad. His knees were shaking, his hair stood on end.

The priest saw his terror and his own opportunity. 'Ay, in an hour,' he continued slowly, looking at him with cruel eyes. 'In an hour, lad! You must be fond of pain to court it, and out of humour with life to throw it away. Or stay,' he continued abruptly, after considering Simon's agony for a moment, and doubtless deducing from it a last hope, 'I will be merciful. I will give you one more chance.'

'And yourself?' I said with a sneer.

'As you please,' he answered, declining to be diverted from the trembling lad, whom his gaze seemed to fascinate. 'I will give you until half an hour after sunset this evening to reconsider the matter. If you make up your minds to accept my terms, meet me then. I leave to-night for Paris, and I will give you until the last moment. But,'

he continued grimly, 'if you do not meet me, or, meeting me, remain obstinate—God do so to me, and more also, if you see the sun rise thrice.'

Some impulse, I know not what, seeing that I had no thought of accepting his terms or meeting him, led me to ask briefly, 'Where?'

'On the Parvis of the Cathedral,' he answered after a moment's calculation. 'At the north-east corner, half an hour after sunset. It is a quiet spot.'

Simon uttered a stifled exclamation. And then for a moment there was silence in the room, while the lad breathed hard and irregularly, and I stood rooted to the spot, looking so long and so strangely at the priest that Father Antoine laid his hand again on the door and glanced uneasily behind him. Nor was he content until he had hit on, as he fancied, the cause of my strange regard.

'Ha!' he said, his thin lip curling in conceit at his astuteness, 'I understand. You think to kill me to-night? Let me tell you, this house is watched. If you leave here to meet me with any companion—unless it be M. d'Agen, whom I can trust—I shall be warned, and be gone before you reach the rendezvous. And gone, mind you,' he added, with a grim smile, 'to sign your death-warrant.'

He went out with that, closing the door behind him; and we heard his step go softly down the staircase. I gazed at Simon, and he at me, with all the astonishment and awe which it was natural we should feel in presence of so remarkable a coincidence.

For by a marvel the priest had named the same spot and the same time as the sender of the velvet knot!

'He will go,' Simon said, his face flushed and his voice trembling, 'and they will go.'

'And in the dark they will not know him,' I muttered. 'He is about my height. They will take him for me!'

'And kill him!' Simon cried hysterically. 'They will kill him! He goes to his death, monsieur. It is the finger of God.'

CHAPTER XX.

THE KING'S FACE.

It seemed so necessary to bring home the crime to Bruhl should the priest really perish in the trap laid for me, that I came near to falling into one of those mistakes to which men of action are prone. For my first impulse was to follow the priest to the Parvis, closely enough, if possible, to detect the assassins in the act, and with sufficient force, if I could muster it, to arrest them. The credit of dissuading me from this course lies with Simon, who pointed out its dangers in so convincing a manner that I was brought with little difficulty to relinquish it.

Instead, acting on his advice, I sent him to M. d'Agen's lodging, to beg that young gentleman to call upon me before evening. After searching the lodging and other places in vain, Simon found M. d'Agen in the tennis-court at the Castle, and, inventing a crafty excuse, brought him to my lodging a full hour before the time.

My visitor was naturally surprised to find that I had nothing particular to say to him. I dared not tell him what occupied my thoughts, and for the rest invention failed me. But his gaiety and those pretty affectations on which he spent an infinity of pains, for the purpose, apparently, of hiding the sterling worth of a character deficient neither in courage nor backbone, were united to much good nature. Believing at last that I had sent for him in a fit of the vapours, he devoted himself to amusing me and abusing Bruhl—a very favourite pastime with him. And in this way he made out a call of two hours.

I had not long to wait for proof of Simon's wisdom in taking this precaution. We thought it prudent to keep within doors after our guest's departure, and so passed the night in ignorance whether anything had happened or not. But about seven next morning one of the Marquis's servants,

despatched by M. d'Agen, burst in upon us with the news —which was no news from the moment his hurried footstep sounded on the stairs—that Father Antoine had been set upon and killed the previous evening!

I heard this confirmation of my hopes with grave thankfulness; Simon with so much emotion that when the messenger was gone he sat down on a stool and began to sob and tremble as if he had lost his mother, instead of a mortal foe. I took advantage of the occasion to read him a sermon on the end of crooked courses; nor could I myself recall without a shudder the man's last words to me; or the lawless and evil designs in which he had rejoiced, while standing on the very brink of the pit which was to swallow up both him and them in everlasting darkness.

Naturally, the uppermost feeling in my mind was relief. I was free once more. In all probability the priest had kept his knowledge to himself, and without him his agents would be powerless. Simon, it is true, heard that the town was much excited by the event; and that many attributed it to the Huguenots. But we did not suffer ourselves to be depressed by this, nor had I any foreboding until the sound of a second hurried footstep mounting the stairs reached our ears.

I knew the step in a moment for M. d'Agen's, and something ominous in its ring brought me to my feet before he opened the door. Significant as was his first hasty look round the room, he recovered at sight of me all his habitual *sang-froid*. He saluted me, and spoke coolly, though rapidly. But he panted, and I noticed in a moment that he had lost his lisp.

'I am happy in finding you,' he said, closing the door carefully behind him, 'for I am the bearer of ill news, and there is not a moment to be lost. The king has signed an order for your instant consignment to prison, M. de Marsac, and, once there, it is difficult to say what may not happen.'

'My consignment?' I exclaimed. I may be pardoned if the news for a moment found me unprepared.

'Yes,' he replied quickly. 'The king has signed it at the instance of Marshal Retz.'

'But for what?' I cried in amazement.

'The murder of Father Antoine. You will pardon me,' he continued urgently, 'but this is no time for words. The Provost-Marshal is even now on his way to arrest you. Your only hope is to evade him, and gain an audience of the king. I have persuaded my uncle to go with you, and he is waiting at his lodgings. There is not a moment to be lost, however, if you would reach the king's presence before you are arrested.'

'But I am innocent!' I cried.

'I know it,' M. d'Agen answered, 'and can prove it. But if you cannot get speech of the king innocence will avail you nothing. You have powerful enemies. Come without more ado, M. de Marsac, I pray,' he added.

His manner, even more than his words, impressed me with a sense of urgency; and postponing for a time my own judgment, I hurriedly thanked him for his friendly offices. Snatching up my sword, which lay on a chair, I buckled it on; for Simon's fingers trembled so violently he could give me no help. This done I nodded to M. d'Agen to go first, and followed him from the room, Simon attending us of his own motion. It would be then about eleven o'clock in the forenoon.

My companion ran down the stairs without ceremony, and so quickly it was all I could do to keep up with him. At the outer door he signed me to stand, and darting himself into the street, he looked anxiously in the direction of the Rue St. Denys. Fortunately the coast was still clear, and he beckoned to me to follow him. I did so and starting to walk in the opposite direction as fast as we could, in less than a minute we had put a corner between us and the house.

Our hopes of escaping unseen, however, were promptly dashed. The house, I have said, stood in a quiet by-street, which was bounded on the farther side by a garden-wall but-

tressed at intervals. We had scarcely gone a dozen paces from my door when a man slipped from the shelter of one of these buttresses, and after a single glance at us, set off to run towards the Rue St. Denys.

M. d'Agen looked back and nodded. 'There goes the news,' he said. 'They will try to cut us off, but I think we have the start of them.'

I made no reply, feeling that I had resigned myself entirely into his hands. But as we passed through the Rue de Valois, in part of which a market was held at this hour, attracting a considerable concourse of peasants and others, I fancied I detected signs of unusual bustle and excitement. It seemed unlikely that news of the priest's murder should affect so many people and to such a degree, and I asked M. d'Agen what it meant.

'There is a rumour abroad,' he answered, without slackening speed, 'that the king intends to move south to Tours at once.'

I muttered my surprise and satisfaction. 'He will come to terms with the Huguenots then?' I said.

'It looks like it,' M. d'Agen rejoined. 'Retz's party are in an ill-humour on that account, and will wreak it on you if they get a chance. On guard!' he added abruptly. 'Here are two of them!'

As he spoke we emerged from the crowd, and I saw, half a dozen paces in front of us, and coming to meet us, a couple of Court gallants, attended by as many servants. They espied us at the same moment, and came across the street, which was tolerably wide at that part, with the evident intention of stopping us. Simultaneously, however, we crossed to take their side, and so met them face to face in the middle of the way.

'M. d'Agen,' the foremost exclaimed, speaking in a haughty tone, and with a dark side glance at me, 'I am sorry to see you in such company! Doubtless you are not aware that this gentleman is the subject of an order which has even now been issued to the Provost-Marshal.'

'And if so, sir? What of that?' my companion lisped in his silkiest tone.

'What of that?' the other cried, frowning, and pushing slightly forward.

'Precisely,' M. d'Agen repeated, laying his hand on his hilt and declining to give back. 'I am not aware that his Majesty has appointed you Provost-Marshal, or that you have any warrant, M. Villequier, empowering you to stop gentlemen in the public streets.'

M. Villequier reddened with anger. 'You are young, M. d'Agen,' he said, his voice quivering, 'or I would make you pay dearly for that!'

'My friend is not young,' M. d'Agen retorted, bowing. 'He is a gentleman of birth, M. Villequier; by repute, as I learned yesterday, one of the best swordsmen in France, and no Gascon. If you feel inclined to arrest him, do so, I pray. And I will have the honour of engaging your son.'

As we had all by this time our hands on our swords, there needed but a blow to bring about one of those street brawls which were more common then than now. A number of market-people, drawn to the spot by our raised voices, had gathered round, and were waiting eagerly to see what would happen. But Villequier, as my companion perhaps knew, was a Gascon in heart as well as by birth, and seeing our determined aspects, thought better of it. Shrugging his shoulders with an affectation of disdain which imposed on no one, he signalled to his servants to go on, and himself stood aside.

'I thank you for your polite offer,' he said with an evil smile, 'and will remember it. But as you say, sir, I am not the Provost-Marshal.'

Paying little heed to his words, we bowed, passed him, and hurried on. But the peril was not over. Not only had the *rencontre* cost us some precious minutes, but the Gascon, after letting us proceed a little way, followed us. And word being passed by his servants, as we supposed, that one of us was the murderer of Father Antoine, the rumour

spread through the crowd like wildfire, and in a few moments we found ourselves attended by a troop of *canaille* who, hanging on our skirts, caused Simon Fleix no little apprehension. Notwithstanding the contempt which M. d'Agen, whose bearing throughout was admirable, expressed for them, we might have found it necessary to turn and teach them a lesson had we not reached M. de Rambouillet's in the nick of time; where we found the door surrounded by half a dozen armed servants, at sight of whom our persecutors fell back with the cowardice which is usually found in that class.

If I had been tempted of late to think M. de Rambouillet fickle, I had no reason to complain now; whether his attitude was due to M. d'Agen's representations, or to the reflection that without me the plans he had at heart must miscarry. I found him waiting within, attended by three gentlemen, all cloaked and ready for the road; while the air of purpose which sat on his brow indicated that he thought the crisis no common one. Not a moment was lost, even in explanations. Waving me to the door again, and exchanging a few sentences with his nephew, he gave the word to start, and we issued from the house in a body. Doubtless the fact that those who sought to ruin me were his political enemies had some weight with him; for I saw his face harden as his eyes met those of M. de Villequier, who passed slowly before the door as we came out. The Gascon, however, was not the man to interfere with so large a party, and dropped back; while M. de Rambouillet, after exchanging a cold salute with him, led the way towards the Castle at a round pace. His nephew and I walked one on either side of him, and the others, to the number of ten or eleven, pressed on behind in a compact body, our cortège presenting so determined a front that the crowd, which had remained hanging about the door, fled every way. Even some peaceable folk who found themselves in our road took the precaution of slipping into doorways, or stood aside to give us the full width of the street.

I remarked—and I think it increased my anxiety—that our leader was dressed with more than usual care and richness, but, unlike his attendants, wore no arms. He took occasion, as we hurried along, to give me a word of advice. 'M. de Marsac,' he said, looking at me suddenly, 'my nephew has given me to understand that you place yourself entirely in my hands.'

I replied that I asked for no better fortune, and, whatever the event, thanked him from the bottom of my heart.

'Be pleased then to keep silence until I bid you speak,' he replied sharply, for he was one of those whom a sudden stress sours and exacerbates. 'And, above all, no violence without my orders. We are about to fight a battle, and a critical one, but it must be won with our heads. If we can we will keep you out of the Provost-Marshal's hands.'

And if not? I remembered the threats Father Antoine had used, and in a moment I lost sight of the street with all its light and life and movement. I felt no longer the wholesome stinging of the wind. I tasted instead a fetid air, and saw round me a narrow cell and masked figures, and in particular a swathy man in a leather apron leaning over a brazier, from which came lurid flames. And I was bound. I experienced that utter helplessness which is the last test of courage. The man came forward, and then—then, thank God! the vision passed away. An exclamation to which M. d'Agen gave vent, brought me back to the present, and to the blessed knowledge that the fight was not yet over.

We were within a score of paces, I found, of the Castle gates; but so were also a second party, who had just debouched from a side-street, and now hurried on, pace for pace, with us, with the evident intention of forestalling us. The race ended in both companies reaching the entrance at the same time, with the consequence of some jostling taking place amongst the servants. This must have led to blows but for the strenuous commands which M. de Rambouillet had laid upon his followers. I found myself in a moment confronted by a row of scowling faces, while a dozen threat-

ening hands were stretched out towards me, and as many voices, among which I recognised Fresnoy's, cried out tumultuously, 'That is he! That is the one!'

An elderly man in a quaint dress stepped forward, a paper in his hand, and, backed as he was by half a dozen halberdiers, would in a moment have laid hands on me if M. de Rambouillet had not intervened with a negligent air of authority, which sat on him the more gracefully as he held nothing but a riding-switch in his hands. 'Tut, tut! What is this?' he said lightly. 'I am not wont to have my people interfered with, M. Provost, without my leave. You know me, I suppose?'

'Perfectly, M. le Marquis,' the man answered with dogged respect; 'but this is by the king's special command.'

'Very good,' my patron answered, quietly eyeing the faces behind the Provost-Marshal, as if he were making a note of them; which caused some of the gentlemen manifest uneasiness. 'That is soon seen, for we are even now about to seek speech with his Majesty.'

'Not this gentleman,' the Provost-Marshal answered firmly, raising his hand again. 'I cannot let him pass.'

'Yes, this gentleman too, by your leave,' the Marquis retorted, lightly putting the hand aside with his cane.

'Sir,' said the other, retreating a step and speaking with some heat, 'this is no jest with all respect. I hold the king's own order, and it may not be resisted.'

The nobleman tapped his silver comfit-box and smiled. 'I shall be the last to resist it—if you have it,' he said languidly.

'You may read it for yourself,' the Provost-Marshal answered, his patience exhausted.

M. de Rambouillet took the parchment with the ends of his fingers, glanced at it, and gave it back. 'As I thought,' he said, 'a manifest forgery.'

'A forgery!' cried the officer, crimson with indignation. 'And I had it from the hands of the king's own secretary!' At this those behind murmured, some 'shame,' and some

one thing, and some another—all with an air so threatening that the Marquis's gentlemen closed up behind him, and M. d'Agen laughed rudely.

But M. de Rambouillet remained unmoved. 'You may have had it from whom you please, sir,' he said. 'It is a forgery, and I shall resist its execution. If you choose to await me here, I will give you my word to render this gentleman to you within an hour, should the order hold good. If you will not wait, I shall command my servants to clear the way, and if ill happen, then the responsibility will lie with you.'

He spoke in so resolute a manner it was not difficult to see that something more was at stake than the arrest of a single man. This was so; the real issue was whether the king, with whose instability it was difficult to cope, should fall back into the hands of his old advisers or not. My arrest was a move in the game intended as a counterblast to the victory which M. de Rambouillet had gained when he persuaded the king to move to Tours; a city in the neighbourhood of the Huguenots, and a place of arms whence union with them would be easy.

The Provost-Marshal could, no doubt, make a shrewd guess at these things. He knew that the order he had would be held valid or not according as one party or the other gained the mastery; and, seeing M. de Rambouillet's resolute demeanour, he gave way. Rudely interrupted more than once by his attendants, among whom were some of Bruhl's men, he muttered an ungracious assent to our proposal; on which, and without a moment's delay, the Marquis took me by the arm and hurried me across the courtyard.

And so far, well. My heart began to rise. But, for the Marquis, as we mounted the staircase the anxiety he had dissembled while we faced the Provost-Marshal, broke out in angry mutterings; from which I gathered that the crisis was yet to come. I was not surprised, therefore, when an usher rose on our appearance in the antechamber, and, quickly crossing the floor, interposed between us and the

door of the chamber, informing the Marquis with a low obeisance that his Majesty was engaged.

'He will see me,' M. de Rambouillet cried, looking haughtily round on the sneering pages and lounging courtiers, who grew civil under his eye.

'I have particular orders, sir, to admit no one,' the man answered.

'Tut, tut, they do not apply to me,' my companion retorted, nothing daunted. 'I know the business on which the king is engaged, and I am here to assist him.' And raising his hand he thrust the startled official aside, and hardily pushed the doors of the chamber open.

The king, surrounded by half a dozen persons, was in the act of putting on his riding-boots. On hearing us, he turned his head with a startled air, and dropped in his confusion one of the ivory cylinders he was using; while his aspect, and that of the persons who stood round him, reminded me irresistibly of a party of schoolboys detected in a fault.

He recovered himself, it is true, almost immediately; and turning his back to us, continued to talk to the persons round him on such trifling subjects as commonly engaged him. He carried on this conversation in a very free way, studiously ignoring our presence; but it was plain he remained aware of it, and even that he was uneasy under the cold and severe gaze which the Marquis, who seemed in nowise affrighted by his reception, bent upon him.

I, for my part, had no longer any confidence. Nay, I came near to regretting that I had persevered in an attempt so useless. The warrant which awaited me at the gates seemed less formidable than his Majesty's growing displeasure; which I saw I was incurring by remaining where I was. It needed not the insolent glance of Marshal Retz, who lounged smiling by the king's hand, or the laughter of a couple of pages who stood at the head of the chamber, to deprive me of my last hope; while some things which might have cheered me—the uneasiness of some about the

king, and the disquietude which underlay Marshal Retz's manner—escaped my notice altogether.

What I did see clearly was that the king's embarrassment was fast changing to anger. The paint which reddened his cheeks prevented any alteration in his colour being visible, but his frown and the nervous manner in which he kept taking off and putting on his jewelled cap betrayed him. At length, signing to one of his companions to follow, he moved a little aside to a window, whence, after a few moments, the gentleman came to us.

'M. de Rambouillet,' he said, speaking coldly and formally, 'his Majesty is displeased by this gentleman's presence, and requires him to withdraw forthwith.'

'His Majesty's word is law,' my patron answered, bowing low, and speaking in a clear voice audible throughout the chamber, 'but the matter which brings this gentleman here is of the utmost importance, and touches his Majesty's person.'

M. de Retz laughed jeeringly. The other courtiers looked grave. The king shrugged his shoulders with a peevish gesture, but after a moment's hesitation, during which he looked first at Retz and then at M. de Rambouillet, he signed to the Marquis to approach.

'Why have you brought him here?' he muttered sharply, looking askance at me. 'He should have been bestowed according to my orders.'

'He has information for your Majesty's private ear,' Rambouillet answered. And he looked so meaningly at the king that Henry, I think, remembered on a sudden his compact with Rosny, and my part in it; for he started with the air of a man suddenly awakened. 'To prevent that information reaching you, sire,' my patron continued, 'his enemies have practised on your Majesty's well-known sense of justice.'

'Oh, but stay, stay!' the king cried, hitching forward the scanty cloak he wore, which barely came down to his waist. 'The man has killed a priest! He has killed a priest, man!'

he repeated with confidence, as if he had now got hold of the right argument.

'That is not so, sire, craving your Majesty's pardon,' M. de Rambouillet replied with the utmost coolness.

'Tut! Tut! The evidence is clear,' the king said peevishly.

'As to that, sire,' my companion rejoined, 'if it is of the murder of Father Antoine he is accused, I say boldly that there is none.'

'Then there you are mistaken!' the king answered. 'I heard it with my own ears this morning.'

'Will you deign, sire, to tell me its nature?' M. de Rambouillet persisted.

But on that Marshal Retz thought it necessary to intervene. 'Need we turn his Majesty's chamber into a court of justice?' he said smoothly. Hitherto he had not spoken; trusting, perhaps, to the impression he had already made upon the king.

M. de Rambouillet took no notice of him.

'But Bruhl,' said the king, 'you see, Bruhl says ——'

'Bruhl!' my companion replied, with so much contempt that Henry started. 'Surely your Majesty has not taken his word against this gentleman, of all people?'

Thus reminded, a second time, of the interests entrusted to me, and of the advantage which Bruhl would gain by my disappearance, the king looked first confused, and then angry. He vented his passion in one or two profane oaths, with the childish addition that we were all a set of traitors, and that he had no one whom he could trust. But my companion had touched the right chord at last; for when the king grew more composed, he waved aside Marshal Retz's protestations, and sullenly bade Rambouillet say what he had to say.

'The monk was killed, sire, about sunset,' he answered. 'Now my nephew, M. d'Agen, is without, and will tell your Majesty that he was with this gentleman at his lodgings from about an hour before sunset last evening until a full

hour after. Consequently, M. de Marsac can hardly be the assassin, and M. le Maréchal must look elsewhere if he wants vengeance.'

'Justice, sir, not vengeance,' Marshal Retz said with a dark glance. His keen Italian face hid his trouble well, but a little pulse of passion beating in his olive cheek betrayed the secret to those who knew him. He had a harder part to play than his opponent; for while Rambouillet's hands were clean, Retz knew himself a traitor, and liable at any moment to discovery and punishment.

'Let M. d'Agen be called,' Henry said curtly.

'And if your Majesty pleases,' Retz added, 'M. de Bruhl also. If you really intend, sire, that is, to reopen a matter which I thought had been settled.'

The king nodded obstinately, his face furrowed with ill-temper. He kept his shifty eyes, which seldom met those of the person he addressed, on the floor; and this accentuated the awkward stooping carriage which was natural to him. There were seven or eight dogs of exceeding smallness in the room, and while we waited for the persons who had been summoned, he kicked, now one and now another of the baskets which held them, as if he found in this some vent for his ill-humour.

The witnesses presently appeared, followed by several persons, among whom were the Dukes of Nevers and Mercœur, who came to ride out with the king, and M. de Crillon; so that the chamber grew passably full. The two dukes nodded formally to the Marquis, as they passed him, but entered into a muttered conversation with Retz, who appeared to be urging them to press his cause. They seemed to decline, however, shrugging their short cloaks as if the matter were too insignificant. Crillon on his part cried audibly, and with an oath, to know what the matter was; and being informed, asked whether all this fuss was being made about a damned shaveling monk.

Henry, whose tenderness for the cowl was well known, darted an angry glance at him, but contented himself with

saying sharply to M. d'Agen, 'Now, sir, what do you know about the matter?'

'One moment, sire,' M. Rambouillet cried, interposing before François could answer. 'Craving your Majesty's pardon, you have heard M. de Bruhl's account. May I, as a favour to myself, beg you, sire, to permit us also to hear it?'

'What?' Marshal Retz exclaimed angrily, 'are we to be the judges, then, or his Majesty? Arnidieu!' he continued hotly, 'what, in the fiend's name, have we to do with it? I protest 'fore Heaven——'

'Ay, sir, and what do you protest?' my champion retorted, turning to him with stern disdain.

'Silence!' cried the king, who had listened almost bewildered. 'Silence! By God, gentlemen,' he continued, his eye travelling round the circle with a sparkle of royal anger in it not unworthy of his crown, 'you forget yourselves. I will have none of this quarrelling in my presence or out of it. I lost Quélus and Maugiron that way, and loss enough, and I will have none of it, I say! M. de Bruhl,' he added, standing erect, and looking for the moment, with all his paint and frippery, a king, 'M. de Bruhl, repeat your story.'

The feelings with which I listened to this controversy may be imagined. Devoured in turn by hope and fear as now one side and now the other seemed likely to prevail, I confronted at one moment the gloom of the dungeon, and at another tasted the air of freedom, which had never seemed so sweet before. Strong as these feelings were, however, they gave way to curiosity at this point; when I heard Bruhl called, and saw him come forward at the king's command. Knowing this man to be himself guilty, I marvelled with what face he would present himself before all those eyes, and from what depths of impudence he could draw supplies in such an emergency.

I need not have troubled myself, however, for he was fully equal to the occasion. His high colour and piercing

black eyes met the gaze of friend and foe alike without flinching. Dressed well and elegantly, he wore his raven hair curled in the mode, and looked alike gay, handsome, and imperturbable. If there was a suspicion of coarseness about his bulkier figure, as he stood beside M. d'Agen, who was the courtier perfect and point devise, it went to the scale of sincerity, seeing that men naturally associate truth with strength.

'I know no more than this, sire,' he said easily; 'that, happening to cross the Parvis at the moment of the murder, I heard Father Antoine scream. He uttered four words only, in the tone of a man in mortal peril. They were'—and here the speaker looked for an instant at me—'Ha! Marsac! A moi!'

'Indeed!' M. de Rambouillet said, after looking to the king for permission. 'And that was all? You saw nothing?'

Bruhl shook his head. 'It was too dark,' he said.

'And heard no more?'

'No.'

'Do I understand, then,' the Marquis continued slowly, 'that M. de Marsac is arrested because the priest—God rest his soul!—cried to him for help?'

'For help?' M. de Retz exclaimed fiercely.

'For help?' said the king, surprised. And at that the most ludicrous change fell upon the faces of all. The king looked puzzled, the Duke of Nevers smiled, the Duke of Mercœur laughed aloud. Crillon cried boisterously, 'Good hit!' and the majority, who wished no better than to divine the winning party, grinned broadly, whether they would or no.

To Marshal Retz, however, and Bruhl, that which to everyone else seemed an amusing retort had a totally different aspect; while the former turned yellow with chagrin and came near to choking, the latter looked as chapfallen and startled as if his guilt had been that moment brought home to him. Assured by the tone of the monk's voice—which must, indeed, have thundered in his

ears—that my name was uttered in denunciation by one who thought me his assailant, he had chosen to tell the truth without reflecting that words, so plain to him, might bear a different construction when repeated.

'Certainly the words seem ambiguous,' Henry muttered.

'But it was Marsac killed him,' Retz cried in a rage.

'It is for some evidence of that we are waiting,' my champion answered suavely.

The Marshal looked helplessly at Nevers and Mercœur, who commonly took part with him; but apparently those noblemen had not been primed for this occasion. They merely shook their heads and smiled. In the momentary silence which followed, while all looked curiously at Bruhl, who could not conceal his mortification, M. d'Agen stepped forward.

'If your Majesty will permit me,' he said, a malicious simper crossing his handsome face—I had often remarked his extreme dislike for Bruhl without understanding it—'I think I can furnish some evidence more to the point than that to which M. de Bruhl has with so much fairness restricted himself.' He then went on to state that he had had the honour of being in my company at the time of the murder; and he added, besides, so many details as to exculpate me to the satisfaction of any candid person.

The king nodded. 'That settles the matter,' he said, with a sigh of relief. 'You think so, Mercœur, do you not? Precisely. Villequier, see that the order respecting M. de Marsac is cancelled.'

M. de Retz could not control his wrath on hearing this direction given. 'At this rate,' he cried recklessly, 'we shall have few priests left here! We have got a bad name at Blois, as it is!'

For a moment all in the circle held their breath, while the king's eyes flashed fire at this daring allusion to the murder of the Duke de Guise, and his brother the Cardinal. But it was Henry's misfortune to be ever indulgent in the wrong place, and severe when severity was either unjust or

impolitic. He recovered himself with an effort, and revenged himself only by omitting to invite the Marshal, who was now trembling in his shoes, to join his riding-party.

The circle broke up amid some excitement. I stood on one side with M. d'Agen, while the king and his immediate following passed out, and, greatly embarrassed as I was by the civil congratulating of many who would have seen me hang with equal goodwill, I was sharp enough to see that something was brewing between Bruhl and Marshal Retz, who stood back conversing in low tones. I was not surprised, therefore, when the former made his way towards me through the press which filled the antechamber, and with a lowering brow requested a word with me.

'Certainly,' I said, watching him narrowly, for I knew him to be both treacherous and a bully. 'Speak on, sir.'

'You have baulked me once and again,' he rejoined, in a voice which shook a little, as did the fingers with which he stroked his waxed moustache. 'There is no need of words between us. I, with one sword besides, will to-morrow at noon keep the bridge at Chaverny, a league from here. It is an open country. Possibly your pleasure may lead you to ride that way with a friend?'

'You may depend upon me, sir,' I answered, bowing low, and feeling thankful that the matter was at length to be brought to a fair and open arbitration. 'I will be there—and in person. For my deputy last night,' I added, searching his face with a steadfast eye, 'seems to have been somewhat unlucky.'

CHAPTER XXI.

TWO WOMEN.

Out of compliment, and to show my gratitude, I attended M. de Rambouillet home to his lodging, and found him as much pleased with himself, and consequently with me, as I

was with him. For the time, indeed, I came near to loving him; and, certainly, he was a man of high and patriotic feeling, and of skill and conduct to match. But he lacked that touch of nature and that power of sympathising with others which gave to such men as M. de Rosny and the king, my master, their peculiar charm; though after what I have related of him in the last chapter it does not lie in my mouth to speak ill of him. And, indeed, he was a good man.

When I at last reached my lodging, I found a surprise awaiting me in the shape of a note which had just arrived no one knew how. If the manner of its delivery was mysterious, however, its contents were brief and sufficiently explicit; for it ran thus: '*Sir, by meeting me three hours after noon in the square before the House of the Little Sisters you will do a service at once to yourself and to the undersigned, Marie de Bruhl.*'

That was all, written in a feminine character, yet it was enough to perplex me. Simon, who had manifested the liveliest joy at my escape, would have had me treat it as I had treated the invitation to the Parvis of the Cathedral; ignore it altogether I mean. But I was of a different mind, and this for three reasons, among others: that the request was straightforward, the time early, and the place sufficiently public to be an unlikely theatre for violence, though well fitted for an interview to which the world at large was not invited. Then, too, the square lay little more than a bowshot from my lodging, though on the farther side of the Rue St. Denys.

Besides, I could conceive many grounds which Madame de Bruhl might have for seeing me; of which some touched me nearly. I disregarded Simon's warnings, therefore, and repaired at the time appointed to the place—a clean, paved square a little off the Rue St. Denys, and entered from the latter by a narrow passage. It was a spot pleasantly convenient for meditation, but overlooked on one side by the House of the Little Sisters; in which, as I guessed afterwards, madame must have awaited me, for the square when

I entered it was empty, yet in a moment, though no one came in from the street, she stood beside me. She wore a mask and long cloak. The beautiful hair and perfect complexion, which had filled me with so much admiration at our first meeting in her house, were hidden, but I saw enough of her figure and carriage to be sure that it was Madame de Bruhl and no other.

She began by addressing me in a tone of bitterness, for which I was not altogether unprepared.

'Well, sir,' she exclaimed, her voice trembling with anger, 'you are satisfied, I hope, with your work?'

I expected this and had my answer ready. 'I am not aware, madame,' I said, 'that I have cause to reproach myself. But, however that may be, I trust you have summoned me for some better purpose than to chide me for another's fault; though it was my voice which brought it to light.'

'Why did you shame me publicly?' she retorted, thrusting her handkerchief to her lips and withdrawing it again with a passionate gesture.

'Madame,' I answered patiently—I was full of pity for her, 'consider for a moment the wrong your husband did me, and how small and inadequate was the thing I did to him in return.'

'To him!' she ejaculated so fiercely that I started. 'It was to me—to me you did it! What had I done that you should expose me to the ridicule of those who know no pity, and the anger of one as merciless? What had I done, sir?'

I shook my head sorrowfully. 'So far, madame,' I answered, 'I allow I owe you reparation, and I will make it should it ever be in my power. Nay, I will say more,' I continued, for the tone in which she spoke had wrung my heart. 'In one point I strained the case against your husband. To the best of my belief he abducted the lady who was in my charge, not for the love of her, but for political reasons, and as the agent of another.'

She gasped. 'What?' she cried. 'Say that again!'

As I complied she tore off her mask and gazed into my face with straining eyes and parted lips. I saw then how much she was changed, even in these few days—how pale and worn were her cheeks, how dark the circles round her eyes. 'Will you swear to it?' she said at last, speaking with uncontrollable eagerness, while she laid a hand which shook with excitement on my arm. 'Will you swear to it, sir?'

'It is true,' I answered steadfastly. I might have added that after the event her husband had so treated mademoiselle as to lead her to fear the worst. But I refrained, feeling that it was no part of my duty to come between husband and wife.

She clasped her hands, and for a moment looked passionately upwards, as though she were giving thanks to Heaven; while the flush of health and loveliness which I had so much admired returned, and illumined her face in a wonderful manner. She seemed, in truth and for the moment, transformed. Her blue eyes filled with tears, her lips moved; nor have I ever seen anything bear so near a resemblance to those pictures of the Virgin Mary which Romans worship as madame did then.

The change, however, was as evanescent as it was admirable. In an instant she seemed to collapse. She struck her hands to her face and moaned, and I saw tears, which she vainly strove to restrain, dropping through her fingers. 'Too late!' she murmured, in a tone of anguish which wrung my heart. 'Alas, you robbed me of one man, you give me back another. I know him now for what he is. If he did not love her then, he does now. It is too late!'

She seemed so much overcome that I assisted her to reach a bench which stood against the wall a few paces away; nor, I confess, was it without difficulty and much self-reproach that I limited myself to those prudent offices only which her state and my duty required. To console her on the subject of her husband was impossible; to ignore him,

and so to console her, a task which neither my discretion nor my sense of honour, though sorely tried, permitted me to undertake.

She presently recovered and, putting on her mask again, said hurriedly that she had still a word to say to me. 'You have treated me honestly,' she continued, 'and, though I have no cause to do anything but hate you, I say in return, look to yourself! You escaped last night—I know all, for it was my velvet knot—which I had made thinking to send it to you to procure this meeting—that he used as a lure. But he is not yet at the end of his resources. Look to yourself, therefore.'

I thought of the appointment I had made with him for the morrow, but I confined myself to thanking her, merely saying, as I bowed over the hand she resigned to me in token of farewell, 'Madame, I am grateful. I am obliged to you both for your warning and your forgiveness.'

Bending her head coldly she drew away her hand. At that moment, as I lifted my eyes, I saw something which for an instant rooted me to the spot with astonishment. In the entrance of the passage which led to the Rue St. Denys two people were standing, watching us. The one was Simon Fleix, and the other, a masked woman, a trifle below the middle height, and clad in a riding-coat, was Mademoiselle de la Vire!

I knew her in a moment. But the relief I experienced on seeing her safe and in Blois was not unmixed with annoyance that Simon Fleix should have been so imprudent as to parade her unnecessarily in the street. I felt something of confusion also on my own account; for I could not tell how long she and her escort had been watching me. And these two feelings were augmented when, after turning to pay a final salute to Madame de Bruhl, I looked again towards the passage and discovered that mademoiselle and her squire were gone.

Impatient as I was, I would not seem to leave madame rudely or without feeling, after the consideration she had

shown me in her own sorrow; and accordingly I waited uncovered until she disappeared within the 'Little Sisters.' Then I started eagerly towards my lodging, thinking I might yet overtake mademoiselle before she entered. I was destined to meet, however, with another though very pertinent hindrance. As I passed from the Rue St. Denys into the quiet of my street I heard a voice calling my name, and, looking back, saw M. de Rambouillet's equerry, a man deep in his confidence, running after me. He brought a message from his master, which he begged me to consider of the first importance.

'The Marquis would not trust it to writing, sir,' he continued, drawing me aside into a corner where we were conveniently retired, 'but he made me learn it by heart. "Tell M. de Marsac," said he, "that that which he was left in Blois to do must be done quickly, or not at all. There is something afoot in the other camp, I am not sure what. But now is the time to knock in the nail. I know his zeal, and I depend upon him."'

An hour before I should have listened to this message with serious doubts and misgivings. Now, acquainted with mademoiselle's arrival, I returned M. de Rambouillet an answer in the same strain, and parting civilly from Bertram, who was a man I much esteemed, I hastened on to my lodgings, exulting in the thought that the hour and the woman were come at last, and that before the dawn of another day I might hope, all being well, to accomplish with honour to myself and advantage to others the commission which M. de Rosny had entrusted to me.

I must not deny that, mingled with this, was some excitement at the prospect of seeing mademoiselle again. I strove to conjure up before me as I mounted the stairs the exact expression of her face as I had last seen it bending from the window at Rosny; to the end that I might have some guide for my future conduct, and might be less likely to fall into the snare of a young girl's coquetry. But I could come now, as then, to no satisfactory or safe con-

clusion, and only felt anew the vexation I had experienced on losing the velvet knot, which she had given me on that occasion.

I knocked at the door of the rooms which I had reserved for her, and which were on the floor below my own; but I got no answer. Supposing that Simon had taken her upstairs, I mounted quickly, not doubting I should find her there. Judge of my surprise and dismay when I found that room also empty, save for the lackey whom M. de Rambouillet had lent me!

'Where are they?' I asked the man, speaking sharply, and standing with my hand on the door.

'The lady and her woman, sir?' he answered, coming forward.

'Yes, yes!' I cried impatiently, a sudden fear at my heart.

'She went out immediately after her arrival with Simon Fleix, sir, and has not yet returned,' he answered.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before I heard several persons enter the passage below and begin to ascend the stairs. I did not doubt that mademoiselle and the lad had come home another way and been somehow detained; and I turned with a sigh of relief to receive them. But when the persons whose steps I had heard appeared, they proved to be only M. de Rosny's equerry, stout, burly, and bright-eyed as ever, and two armed servants.

CHAPTER XXII.

'LA FEMME DISPOSE.'

THE moment the equerry's foot touched the uppermost stair I advanced upon him. 'Where is your mistress, man?' I said. 'Where is Mademoiselle de la Vire? Be quick, tell me what you have done with her.'

His face fell amazingly. 'Where is she?' he answered, faltering between surprise and alarm at my sudden onslaught. 'Here, she should be. I left her here not an hour ago. Mon Dieu! Is she not here now?'

His alarm increased mine tenfold. 'No!' I retorted, 'she is not! She is gone! And you—what business had you, in the fiend's name, to leave her here, alone and unprotected? Tell me that!'

He leaned against the balustrade, making no attempt to defend himself, and seemed, in his sudden terror, anything but the bold, alert fellow who had ascended the stairs two minutes before. 'I was a fool,' he groaned. 'I saw your man Simon here; and Fanchette, who is as good as a man, was with her mistress. And I went to stable the horses. I thought no evil. And now—My God!' he added, suddenly straightening himself, while his face grew hard and grim, 'I am undone! My master will never forgive me!'

'Did you come straight here?' I said, considering that, after all, he was no more in fault than I had been on a former occasion.

'We went first to M. de Rosny's lodging,' he answered, 'where we found your message telling us to come here. We came on without dismounting.'

'Mademoiselle may have gone back, and be there,' I said. 'It is possible. Do you stay here and keep a good look-out, and I will go and see. Let one of your men come with me.'

He uttered a brief assent; being a man as ready to take as to give orders, and thankful now for any suggestion which held out a hope of mademoiselle's safety. Followed by the servant he selected, I ran down the stairs, and in a moment was hurrying along the Rue St. Denys. The day was waning. The narrow streets and alleys were already dark, but the air of excitement which I had noticed in the morning still marked the townsfolk, of whom a great number were strolling abroad, or standing in doorways talking to their gossips. Feverishly anxious as I was, I remarked the gloom which dwelt on all faces; but as I set it down

to the king's approaching departure, and besides was intent on seeing that those we sought did not by any chance pass us in the crowd, I thought little of it. Five minutes' walking brought us to M. de Rosny's lodging. There I knocked at the door; impatiently, I confess, and with little hope of success. But, to my surprise, barely an instant elapsed before the door opened, and I saw before me Simon Fleix!

Discovering who it was, he cowered back, with a terrified face, and retreated to the wall with his arm raised.

'You scoundrel!' I exclaimed, restraining myself with difficulty. 'Tell me this moment where Mademoiselle de la Vire is! Or, by Heaven, I shall forget what my mother owed to you, and do you a mischief!'

For an instant he glared at me viciously, with all his teeth exposed, as though he meant to refuse—and more. Then he thought better of it, and, raising his hand, pointed sulkily upwards.

'Go before me and knock at the door,' I said, tapping the hilt of my dagger with meaning.

Cowed by my manner, he obeyed, and led the way to the room in which M. de Rambouillet had surprised us on a former occasion. Here he stopped at the door and knocked gently; on which a sharp voice inside bade us enter. I raised the latch and did so, closing the door behind me.

Mademoiselle, still wearing her riding-coat, sat in a chair before the hearth, on which a newly kindled fire sputtered and smoked. She had her back to me, and did not turn on my entrance, but continued to toy in an absent manner with the strings of the mask which lay in her lap. Fanchette stood bolt upright behind her, with her elbows squared and her hands clasped; in such an attitude that I guessed the maid had been expressing her strong dissatisfaction with this latest whim of her mistress, and particularly with mademoiselle's imprudence in wantonly exposing herself, with so inadequate a guard as Simon, in a place where she had already suffered so much. I was confirmed in this notion on seeing the woman's harsh countenance

clear at sight of me; though the churlish nod, which was all the greeting she bestowed on me, seemed to betoken anything but favour or good-will. She touched her mistress on the shoulder, however, and said, 'M. de Marsac is here.'

Mademoiselle turned her head and looked at me languidly, without stirring in her chair or removing the foot she was warming. 'Good evening,' she said.

The greeting seemed so brief and so commonplace, ignoring, as it did, both the pains and anxiety to which she had just put me and the great purpose for which we were here —to say nothing of that ambiguous parting which she must surely remember as well as I—that the words I had prepared died on my lips, and I looked at her in honest confusion. All her small face was pale except her lips. Her brow was dark, her eyes were hard as well as weary. And not words only failed me as I looked at her, but anger; having mounted the stairs hot foot to chide, I felt on a sudden—despite my new cloak and scabbard, my appointment, and the name I had made at Court—the same consciousness of age and shabbiness and poverty which had possessed me in her presence from the beginning. I muttered, 'Good evening, mademoiselle,' and that was all I could say—I who had frightened the burly Maignan a few minutes before!

Seeing, I have no doubt, the effect she produced on me, she maintained for some time an embarrassing silence. At length she said, frigidly, 'Perhaps M. de Marsac will sit, Fanchette. Place a chair for him. I am afraid, however, that after his successes at Court he may find our reception somewhat cold. But we are only from the country,' she added, looking at me askance, with a gleam of anger in her eyes.

I thanked her huskily, saying that I would not sit, as I could not stay. 'Simon Fleix,' I continued, finding my voice with difficulty, 'has, I am afraid, caused you some trouble by bringing you to this house instead of telling you that I had made preparation for you at my lodgings.'

'It was not Simon Fleix's fault,' she replied curtly. 'I prefer these rooms. They are more convenient.'

'They are, perhaps, more convenient,' I rejoined humbly, 'but I have to think of safety, mademoiselle, as you know. At my house I have a competent guard, and can answer for your being unmolested.'

'You can send your guard here,' she said with a royal air.

'But, mademoiselle——'

'Is it not enough that I have said that I prefer these rooms?' she replied sharply, dropping her mask on her lap and looking round at me in undisguised displeasure. 'Are you deaf, sir? Let me tell you, I am in no mood for argument. I am tired with riding. I prefer these rooms, and that is enough!'

Nothing could exceed the determination with which she said these words, unless it were the malicious pleasure in thwarting my wishes which made itself seen through the veil of assumed indifference. I felt myself brought up with a vengeance, and in a manner the most provoking that could be conceived. But opposition so childish, so utterly wanton, by exciting my indignation, had presently the effect of banishing the peculiar bashfulness I felt in her presence, and recalling me to my duty.

'Mademoiselle,' I said firmly, looking at her with a fixed countenance, 'pardon me if I speak plainly. This is no time for playing with straws. The men from whom you escaped once are as determined and more desperate now. By this time they probably know of your arrival. Do, then, as I ask, I pray and beseech you. Or this time I may lack the power, though never the will, to save you.'

Wholly ignoring my appeal, she looked into my face—for by this time I had advanced to her side—with a whimsical smile. 'You are really much improved in manner since I last saw you,' she said.

'Mademoiselle!' I replied, baffled and repelled. 'What do you mean?'

'What I say,' she answered, flippantly. 'But it was to be expected.'

'For shame!' I cried, provoked almost beyond bearing by her ill-timed raillery, 'will you never be serious until you have ruined us and yourself? I tell you this house is not safe for you! It is not safe for me! I cannot bring my men to it, for there is not room for them. If you have any spark of consideration, of gratitude, therefore——'

'Gratitude!' she exclaimed, swinging her mask slowly to and fro by a ribbon, while she looked up at me as though my excitement amused her. 'Gratitude—'tis a very pretty phrase, and means much; but it is for those who serve us faithfully, M. de Marsac, and not for others. You receive so many favours, I am told, and are so successful at Court, that I should not be justified in monopolising your services.'

'But, mademoiselle—' I said in a low tone. And there I stopped. I dared not proceed.

'Well, sir,' she answered, looking up at me after a moment's silence, and ceasing on a sudden to play with her toy, 'what is it?'

'You spoke of favours,' I continued, with an effort. 'I never received but one from a lady. That was at Rosny, and from your hand.'

'From my hand?' she answered, with an air of cold surprise.

'It was so, mademoiselle.'

'You have fallen into some strange mistake, sir,' she replied, rousing herself, and looking at me indifferently. 'I never gave you a favour.'

I bowed low. 'If you say you did not, mademoiselle, that is enough,' I answered.

'Nay, but do not let me do you an injustice, M. de Marsac,' she rejoined, speaking more quickly and in an altered tone. 'If you can show me the favour I gave you, I shall, of course, be convinced. Seeing is believing, you know,' she added, with a light nervous laugh, and a gesture of something like shyness.

If I had not sufficiently regretted my carelessness, and loss of the bow at the time, I did so now. I looked at her in silence, and saw her face, that had for a moment shown signs of feeling, almost of shame, grow slowly hard again.

'Well, sir?' she said impatiently. 'The proof is easy.'

'It was taken from me; I believe, by M. de Rosny,' I answered lamely, wondering what ill-luck had led her to put the question and press it to this point.

'It was taken from you!' she exclaimed, rising and confronting me with the utmost suddenness, while her eyes flashed, and her little hand crumpled the mask beyond future usefulness. 'It was taken from you, sir!' she repeated, her voice and her whole frame trembling with anger and disdain. 'Then I thank you, I prefer my version. Yours is impossible. For let me tell you, when Mademoiselle de la Vire does confer a favour, it will be on a man with the power and the wit—and the constancy, to keep it, even from M. de Rosny!'

Her scorn hurt, though it did not anger me. I felt it to be in a measure deserved, and raged against myself rather than against her. But aware through all of the supreme importance of placing her in safety, I subjected my immediate feelings to the exigencies of the moment and stooped to an argument which would, I thought, have weight though private pleading failed.

'Putting myself aside, mademoiselle,' I said, with more formality than I had yet used, 'there is one consideration which must weigh with you. The king——'

'The king!' she cried, interrupting me violently, her face hot with passion and her whole person instinct with stubborn self-will. 'I shall not see the king!'

'You will not see the king?' I repeated in amazement.

'No, I will not!' she answered, in a whirl of anger, scorn, and impetuosity. 'There! I will not! I have been made a toy and a tool long enough, M. de Marsac,' she continued, 'and I will serve others' ends no more. I have made up my mind. Do not talk to me; you will do no good, sir. I

would to Heaven,' she added bitterly, 'I had stayed at Chizé and never seen this place!'

'But, mademoiselle,' I said, 'you have not thought——'

'Thought!' she exclaimed, shutting her small white teeth so viciously I all but recoiled. 'I have thought enough. I am sick of thought. I am going to act now. I will be a puppet no longer. You may take me to the castle by force if you will; but you cannot make me speak.'

I looked at her in the utmost dismay and astonishment; being unable at first to believe that a woman who had gone through so much, had run so many risks, and ridden so many miles for a purpose, would, when all was done and the hour come, decline to carry out her plan. I could not believe it, I say, at first; and I tried arguments and entreaties without stint, thinking that she only asked to be entreated or coaxed.

But I found prayers and even threats breath wasted upon her; and beyond these I would not go. I know I have been blamed by some and ridiculed by others for not pushing the matter farther; but those who have stood face to face with a woman of spirit—a woman whose very frailty and weakness fought for her—will better understand the difficulties with which I had to contend and the manner in which conviction was at last borne in on my mind. I had never before confronted stubbornness of this kind. As mademoiselle said again and again, I might force her to Court, but I could not make her speak.

When I had tried every means of persuasion, and still found no way of overcoming her resolution—the while Fanchette looked on with a face of wood, neither aiding me nor taking part against me—I lost, I confess, in the chagrin of the moment that sense of duty which had hitherto animated me; and though my relation to mademoiselle should have made me as careful as ever of her safety, even in her own despite, I left her at last in anger and went out without saying another word about removing her—a thing which was still in my power. I believe a

very brief reflection would have recalled me to myself and my duty; but the opportunity was not given me, for I had scarcely reached the head of the stairs before Fanchette came after me, and called to me in a whisper to stop.

She held a taper in her hand, and this she raised to my face, smiling at the disorder which she doubtless read there. 'Do you say that this house is not safe?' she asked abruptly, lowering the light as she spoke.

'You have tried a house in Blois before?' I replied with the same bluntness. 'You should know as well as I, woman.'

'She must be taken from here, then,' she answered, nodding her head, cunningly. 'I can persuade her. Do you send for your people, and be here in half an hour. It may take me that time to wheedle her. But I shall do it.'

'Then listen,' I said eagerly, seizing the opportunity and her sleeve and drawing her farther from the door. 'If you can persuade her to that, you can persuade to all I wish. Listen, my friend,' I continued, sinking my voice still lower. 'If she will see the king for only ten minutes, and tell him what she knows, I will give you——'

'What?' the woman asked suddenly and harshly, drawing at the same time her sleeve from my hand.

'Fifty crowns,' I replied, naming in my desperation a sum which would seem a fortune to a person in her position. 'Fifty crowns down, the moment the interview is over.'

'And for that you would have me sell her!' the woman cried with a rude intensity of passion which struck me like a blow. 'For shame! For shame, man! You persuaded her to leave her home and her friends, and the country where she was known; and now you would have me sell her! Shame on you! Go!' she added scornfully. 'Go this instant and get your men. The king, say you? The king! I tell you I would not have her finger ache to save all your kings!'

She flounced away with that, and I retired crestfallen;

wondering much at the fidelity which Providence, doubtless for the well-being of the gentle, possibly for the good of all, has implanted in the humble. Finding Simon, to whom I had scarce patience to speak, waiting on the stairs below, I despatched him to Maignan, to bid him come to me with his men. Meanwhile I watched the house myself until their arrival, and then, going up, found that Fanchette had been as good as her word. Mademoiselle, with a sullen mien, and a red spot on either cheek, consented to descend, and, preceded by a couple of links, which Maignan had thoughtfully provided, was escorted safely to my lodgings; where I bestowed her in the rooms below my own, which I had designed for her.

At the door she turned and bowed to me, her face on fire.

'So far, sir, you have got your way,' she said, breathing quickly. 'Do not flatter yourself, however, that you will get it farther—even by bribing my woman!'

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE LAST VALOIS.

I STOOD for a few moments on the stairs, wondering what I should do in an emergency to which the Marquis's message of the afternoon attached so pressing a character. Had it not been for that I might have waited until morning, and felt tolerably certain of finding mademoiselle in a more reasonable mood then. But as it was I dared not wait. I dared not risk the delay, and I came quickly to the conclusion that the only course open to me was to go at once to M. de Rambouillet, and tell him frankly how the matter stood.

Maignan had posted one of his men at the open doorway leading into the street, and fixed his own quarters on the

landing at the top, whence he could overlook an intruder without being seen himself. Satisfied with the arrangement, I left Rambouillet's man to reinforce him, and took with me Simon Fleix, of whose conduct in regard to mademoiselle I entertained the gravest doubts.

The night, I found on reaching the street, was cold, the sky where it was visible between the eaves being bright with stars. A sharp wind was blowing, too, compelling us to wrap our cloaks round us and hurry on at a pace which agreed well with the excitement of my thoughts. Assured that had mademoiselle been complaisant I might have seen my mission accomplished within the hour, it was impossible I should not feel impatient with one who, to gratify a whim, played with the secrets of a kingdom as if they were counters, and risked in passing ill-humour the results of weeks of preparation. And I was impatient, and with her. But my resentment fell so far short of the occasion that I wondered uneasily at my own easiness, and felt more annoyed with myself for failing to be properly annoyed with her, than inclined to lay the blame where it was due. It was in vain I told myself contemptuously that she was a woman, and that women were not accountable. I felt that the real secret and motive of my indulgence lay, not in this, but in the suspicion, which her reference to the favour given me on my departure from Rosny had converted almost into a certainty, that I was myself the cause of her sudden ill-humour.

I might have followed this train of thought farther, and to very pertinent conclusions. But on reaching M. de Rambouillet's lodging I was diverted from it by the abnormally quiet aspect of the house, on the steps of which half a dozen servants might commonly be seen lounging. Now the doors were closed, no lights shone through the windows, and the hall sounded empty and desolate when I knocked. Not a lackey hurried to receive me even then; but the slipshod tread of the old porter, as he came with a lantern to open, alone broke the silence. I waited eagerly wondering

what all this could mean; and when the man at last opened, and, recognising my face, begged my pardon if he had kept me waiting I asked him impatiently what was the matter.

'And where is the Marquis?' I added, stepping inside to be out of the wind, and loosening my cloak.

'Have you not heard, sir?' the man asked, holding up his lantern to my face. He was an old, wizened, lean fellow. 'It is a break-up, sir, I am afraid, this time.'

'A break-up?' I rejoined, peevishly. 'Speak out, man! What is the matter? I hate mysteries.'

'You have not heard the news, sir? That the Duke of Mercœur and Marshal Retz, with all their people, left Blois this afternoon?'

'No?' I answered, somewhat startled. 'Whither are they gone?'

'To Paris, it is said, sir,—to join the League.'

'But do you mean that they have deserted the king?' I asked.

'For certain, sir!' he answered.

'Not the Duke of Mercœur?' I exclaimed. 'Why, man, he is the king's brother-in-law. He owes everything to him.'

'Well, he is gone, sir,' the old man answered positively. 'The news was brought to M. le Marquis about four o'clock or a little after. He got his people together, and started after them to try and persuade them to return. Or, so it is said.'

As quickly as I could, I reviewed the situation in my mind. If this strange news were true, and men like Mercœur, who had every reason to stand by the king, as well as men like Retz, who had long been suspected of disaffection, were abandoning the Court, the danger must be coming close indeed. The king must feel his throne already tottering, and be eager to grasp at any means of supporting it. Under such circumstances it seemed to be my paramount duty to reach him; to gain his ear if possible, and at all risks; that I and not Bruhl, Navarre not Turenne, might profit by the first impulse of self-preservation.

Bidding the porter shut his door and keep close, I hurried to the Castle, and was presently more than confirmed in my resolution. For to my surprise I found the Court in much the same state as M. de Rambouillet's house. There were double guards indeed at the gates, who let me pass after scrutinising me narrowly; but the courtyard, which should have been at this hour ablaze with torches and crowded with lackeys and grooms, was a dark wilderness, in which half a dozen links trembled mournfully. Passing through the doors I found things within in the same state: the hall ill lit and desolate; the staircase manned only by a few whispering groups, who scanned me as I passed; the antechambers almost empty, or occupied by the grey uniforms of the Switzer guards. Where I had looked to see courtiers assembling to meet their sovereign and assure him of their fidelity, I found only gloomy faces, watchful eyes, and mouths ominously closed. An air of constraint and foreboding rested on all. A single footstep sounded hollowly. The long corridors, which had so lately rung with laughter and the rattle of dice, seemed already devoted to the silence and desolation which awaited them when the Court should depart. Where any spoke I caught the name of Guise; and I could have fancied that his mighty shadow lay upon the place and cursed it.

Entering the chamber, I found matters little better there. His Majesty was not present, nor were any of the Court ladies; but half a dozen gentlemen, among whom I recognised Revol, one of the king's secretaries, stood near the alcove. They looked up on my entrance, as though expecting news, and then, seeing who it was, looked away again impatiently. The Duke of Nevers was walking moodily to and fro before one of the windows, his hands clasped behind his back: while Biron and Crillon, reconciled by the common peril, talked loudly on the hearth. I hesitated a moment, uncertain how to proceed, for I was not yet so old at Court as to feel at home there. But, at last making up my mind, I walked boldly up to Crillon and re-

quested his good offices to procure me an immediate audience of the king.

'An audience? Do you mean you want to see him alone?' he said, raising his eyebrows and looking whimsically at Biron.

'That is my petition, M. de Crillon,' I answered firmly, though my heart sank. 'I am here on M. de Rambouillet's business, and I need to see his Majesty forthwith.'

'Well, that is straightforward,' he replied, clapping me on the shoulder. 'And you shall see him. In coming to Crillon you have come to the right man. Revol,' he continued, turning to the secretary, 'this gentleman bears a message from M. de Rambouillet to the king. Take him to the closet without delay, my friend, and announce him. I will be answerable for him.'

But the secretary shrugged his shoulders up to his ears. 'It is quite impossible, M. de Crillon,' he said gravely. 'Quite impossible at present.'

'Impossible! Chut! I do not know the word,' Crillon retorted rudely. 'Come, take him at once, and blame me if ill comes of it. Do you hear?'

'But his Majesty——'

'Well?'

'Is at his devotions,' the secretary said stiffly.

'His Majesty's devotions be hanged!' Crillon rejoined—so loudly that there was a general titter, and M. de Nevers laughed grimly. 'Do you hear?' the Avennais continued, his face growing redder and his voice higher, 'or must I pull your ears, my friend? Take this gentleman to the closet, I say, and if his Majesty be angry, tell him it was by my order. I tell you he comes from Rambouillet.'

I do not know whether it was the threat, or the mention of M. de Rambouillet's name, which convinced the secretary. But at any rate, after a moment's hesitation, he acquiesced.

He nodded sullenly to me to follow him, and led the way to a curtain which masked the door of the closet. I followed him across the chamber, after muttering a hasty word

of acknowledgment to Crillon; and I had as nearly as possible reached the door when the bustle of some one entering the chamber caught my ear. I had just time to turn and see that this was Bruhl, just time to intercept the dark look of chagrin and surprise which he fixed on me, and then Revol, holding up the curtain, signed to me to enter.

I expected to pass at once into the presence of the king, and had my reverence ready. Instead, I found myself to my surprise in a small chamber, or rather passage, curtained at both ends, and occupied by a couple of guardsmen—members, doubtless, of the Band of the Forty-Five—who rose at my entrance and looked at me dubiously. Their guard-room, dimly illumined by a lamp of red glass, seemed to me, in spite of its curtains and velvet bench, and the thick tapestry which kept out every breath of wholesome air, the most sombre I could imagine. And the most ill-omened. But I had no time to make any long observation; for Revol, passing me brusquely, raised the curtain at the other end, and, with his finger on his lip, bade me by signs to enter.

I did so as silently, the heavy scent of perfumes striking me in the face as I raised a second curtain, and stopped short a pace beyond it; partly in reverence—because kings love their subjects best at a distance—and partly in surprise. For the room, or rather that portion of it in which I stood, was in darkness; only the farther end being illumined by a cold pale flood of moonlight, which, passing through a high, straight window, lay in a silvery sheet on the floor. For an instant I thought I was alone; then I saw, resting against this window, with a hand on either mullion, a tall figure, having something strange about the head. This peculiarity presently resolved itself into the turban in which I had once before seen his Majesty. The king—for he it was—was talking to himself. He had not heard me enter, and having his back to me remained unconscious of my presence.

I paused in doubt, afraid to advance, anxious to withdraw; yet uncertain whether I could move again unheard. At this

moment while I stood hesitating, he raised his voice, and his words, reaching my ears, riveted my attention, so strange and eerie were both they and his tone. 'They say there is ill-luck in thirteen,' he muttered. 'Thirteen Valois and last!' He paused to laugh a wicked, mirthless laugh. 'Ay,—Thirteenth! And it is thirteen years since I entered Paris, a crowned King! There were Quélus and Maugiron and St. Mégrin and I—and *he*, I remember. Ah, those days, those nights! I would sell my soul to live them again; had I not sold it long ago in the living them once! We were young then, and rich, and I was king; and Quélus was an Apollo! He died calling on me to save him. And Maugiron died, blaspheming God and the saints. And St. Mégrin, he had thirty-four wounds. And *he*—he is dead too, curse him! They are all dead, all dead, and it is all over! My God! it is all over, it is all over, it is all over!'

He repeated the last four words more than a dozen times, rocking himself to and fro by his hold on the mullions. I trembled as I listened, partly through fear on my own account should I be discovered, and partly by reason of the horror of despair and remorse—no, not remorse, regret—which spoke in his monotonous voice. I guessed that some impulse had led him to draw the curtain from the window and shade the lamp; and that then, as he looked down on the moonlit country, the contrast between it and the vicious, heated atmosphere, heavy with intrigue and worse, in which he had spent his strength, had forced itself upon his mind. For he presently went on.

'France! There it lies! And what will they do with it? Will they cut it up into pieces, as it was before old Louis XI.? Will Mercœur—curse him!—be the most Christian Duke of Brittany? And Mayenne, by the grace of God, Prince of Paris and the Upper Seine? Or will the little Prince of Béarn beat them, and be Henry IV., King of France and Navarre, Protector of the Churches? Curse him too! He is thirty-six. He is my age. But he is young and strong, and has all before him. While I—I—

oh, my God, have mercy on me! Have mercy on me, O God in Heaven!'

With the last word he fell on his knees on the step before the window, and burst into such an agony of unmanly tears and sobbings as I had never dreamed of or imagined, and least of all in the King of France. Hardly knowing whether to be more ashamed or terrified, I turned at all risks, and stealthily lifting the curtain, crept out with infinite care; and happily with so much good fortune as to escape detection. There was space enough between the two curtains to admit my body and no more; and here I stood a short while to collect my thoughts. Then, striking my scabbard against the wall, as though by accident, and coughing loudly at the same moment, I twitched the curtain aside with some violence and re-entered, thinking that by these means I had given him warning enough.

But I had not reckoned on the darkness in which the room lay, or the excitable state in which I had left him. He heard me, indeed, but being able to see only a tall, indistinct figure approaching him, he took fright, and falling back against the moonlit window, as though he saw a ghost, thrust out his hand, gasping at the same time two words, which sounded to me like 'Ha! Guise!'

The next instant, discerning that I fell on my knee where I stood, and came no nearer, he recovered himself. With an effort, which his breathing made very apparent, he asked in an unsteady voice who it was.

'One of your Majesty's most faithful servants,' I answered, remaining on my knee, and affecting to see nothing.

Keeping his face towards me, he sidled to the lamp and strove to withdraw the shade. But his fingers trembled so violently that it was some time before he succeeded, and set free the cheerful beams, which, suddenly filling the room with radiance, disclosed to my wondering eyes, instead of darkness and the cold gleam of the moon, a profusion of riches, of red stuffs and gemmed trifles and gilded arms crowded together in reckless disorder. A monkey chained

in one corner began to gibber and mow at me. A cloak of strange cut, stretched on a wooden stand, deceived me for an instant into thinking that there was a third person present; while the table, heaped with dolls and powder-puffs, dog-collars and sweet-meats, a mask, a woman's slipper, a pair of pistols, some potions, a scourge, and an immense quantity of like litter, had as melancholy an appearance in my eyes as the king himself, whose disorder the light disclosed without mercy. His turban was awry, and betrayed the premature baldness of his scalp. The paint on his cheeks was cracked and stained, and had soiled the gloves he wore. He looked fifty years old; and in his excitement he had tugged his sword to the front, whence it refused to be thrust back.

'Who sent you here?' he asked, when he had so far recovered his senses as to recognise me, which he did with great surprise.

'I am here, sire,' I answered evasively, 'to place myself at your Majesty's service.'

'Such loyalty is rare,' he answered, with a bitter sneer. 'But stand up, sir. I suppose I must be thankful for small mercies, and, losing a Mercœur, be glad to receive a Marsac.'

'By your leave, sire,' I rejoined hardily, 'the exchange is not so adverse. Your Majesty may make another duke when you will. But honest men are not so easily come by.'

'So! so!' he answered, looking at me with a fierce light in his eyes. 'You remind me in season. I may still make and unmake! I am still King of France? That is so, sirrah, is it not?'

'God forbid that it should be otherwise!' I answered earnestly. 'It is to lay before your Majesty certain means by which you may give fuller effect to your wishes that I am here. The King of Navarre desires only, sire——'

'Tut, tut!' he exclaimed impatiently, and with some displeasure, 'I know his will better than you, man. But you see,' he continued cunningly, forgetting my inferior

position as quickly as he had remembered it, 'Turenne promises well, too. And Turenne—it is true he may play the Lorrainer. But if I trust Henry of Navarre, and he prove false to me——'

He did not complete the sentence, but strode to and fro a time or two, his mind, which had a natural inclination towards crooked courses, bent on some scheme by which he might play off the one party against the other. Apparently he was not very successful in finding one, however; or else the ill-luck with which he had supported the League against the Huguenots recurred to his mind. For he presently stopped, with a sigh, and came back to the point.

'If I knew that Turenne were lying,' he muttered, 'then indeed——. But Rosny promised evidence, and he has sent me none.'

'It is at hand, sire,' I answered, my heart beginning to beat. 'Your Majesty will remember that M. de Rosny honoured me with the task of introducing it to you.'

'To be sure,' he replied, awaking as from a dream, and looking and speaking eagerly. 'Matters to-day have driven everything out of my head. Where is your witness, man? Convince me, and we will act promptly. We will give them Jarnac and Moncontour over again. Is he outside?'

'It is a woman, sire,' I made answer, dashed somewhat by his sudden and feverish alacrity.

'A woman, eh? You have her here?'

'No, sire,' I replied, wondering what he would say to my next piece of information. 'She is in Blois, she has arrived, but the truth is—I humbly crave your Majesty's indulgence—she refuses to come or speak. I cannot well bring her here by force, and I have sought you, sire, for the purpose of taking your commands in the matter.'

He stared at me in the utmost astonishment.

'Is she young?' he asked after a long pause.

'Yes, sire,' I answered. 'She is maid of honour to the Princess of Navarre, and a ward also of the Vicomte de Turenne.'

'Gad! then she is worth hearing, the little rebel!' he replied. 'A ward of Turenne's is she? Ho! ho! And now she will not speak? My cousin of Navarre now would know how to bring her to her senses, but I have eschewed these vanities. I might send and have her brought, it is true; but a very little thing would cause a barricade to-night.'

'And besides, sire,' I ventured to add, 'she is known to Turenne's people here, who have once stolen her away. Were she brought to your Majesty with any degree of openness, they would learn it, and know that the game was lost.'

'Which would not suit me,' he answered, nodding and looking at me gloomily. 'They might anticipate our Jarnac; and until we have settled matters with one or the other our person is not too secure. You must go and fetch her. She is at your lodging. She must be brought, man.'

'I will do what you command, sire,' I answered. 'But I am greatly afraid that she will not come.'

He lost his temper at that. 'Then why, in the devil's name, have you troubled me with the matter?' he cried savagely. 'God knows—I don't—why Rosny employed such a man and such a woman. He might have seen from the cut of your cloak, sir, which is full six months behind the fashion, that you could not manage a woman! Was ever such damnable folly heard of in this world? But it is Navarre's loss, not mine. It is his loss. And I hope to Heaven it may be yours too!' he added fiercely.

There was so much in what he said that I bent before the storm, and accepted with humility blame which was as natural on his part as it was undeserved on mine. Indeed I could not wonder at his Majesty's anger; nor should I have wondered at it in a greater man. I knew that but for reasons, on which I did not wish to dwell, I should have shared it to the full, and spoken quite as strongly of the caprice which ruined hopes and lives for a whim.

The king continued for some time to say to me all the

hard things he could think of. Wearied at last by my patience, he paused, and cried angrily. 'Well, have you nothing to say for yourself? Can you suggest nothing?'

'I dare not mention to your Majesty,' I said humbly, 'what seems to me to be the only alternative.'

'You mean that I should go to the wench!' he answered —for he did not lack quickness. '"*Se no va el otero a Mahoma, vaya Mahoma al otero,*" as Mendoza says. But the saucy quean, to force me to go to her! Did my wife guess—but there, I will go. By God I will go!' he added abruptly and fiercely. 'I will live to ruin Retz yet! Where is your lodging?'

I told him, wondering much at this flash of the old spirit, which twenty years before had won him a reputation his later life did nothing to sustain.

'Do you know,' he asked, speaking with sustained energy and clearness, 'the door by which M. de Rosny entered to talk with me? Can you find it in the dark?'

'Yes, sire,' I answered, my heart beating high.

'Then be in waiting there two hours before midnight,' he replied. 'Be well armed, but alone. I shall know how to make the girl speak. I can trust you, I suppose?' he added suddenly, stepping nearer to me and looking fixedly into my eyes.

'I will answer for your Majesty's life with my own,' I replied, sinking on one knee.

'I believe you, sir,' he answered gravely, giving me his hand to kiss, and then turning away. 'So be it. Now leave me. You have been here too long already. Not a word to any one as you value your life.'

I made fitting answer and was leaving him; but when I had my hand already on the curtain, he called me back. 'In Heaven's name get a new cloak!' he said peevishly, eyeing me all over with his face puckered up. 'Get a new cloak, man, the first thing in the morning. It is worse seen from the side than the front. It would ruin the cleverest courtier of them all!'

CHAPTER XXIV.

A ROYAL PERIL.

THE elation with which I had heard the king announce his resolution quickly diminished on cooler reflection. It stood in particular at a very low ebb as I waited, an hour later, at the little north postern of the Castle, and, cowering within the shelter of the arch to escape the wind, debated whether his Majesty's energy would sustain him to the point of action, or whether he might not, in one of those fits of treacherous vacillation which had again and again marred his plans, send those to keep the appointment who would give a final account of me. The longer I considered his character the more dubious I grew. The loneliness of the situation, the darkness, the black front, unbroken by any glimmer of light, which the Castle presented on this side, and the unusual and gloomy stillness which lay upon the town, all contributed to increase my uneasiness. It was with apprehension as well as relief that I caught at last the sound of footsteps on the stone staircase, and, standing a little to one side, saw a streak of light appear at the foot of the door.

On the latter being partially opened a voice cried my name. I advanced with caution and showed myself. A brief conversation ensued between two or three persons who stood within; but in the end, a masked figure, which I had no difficulty in identifying as the king, stepped briskly out.

'You are armed?' he said, pausing a second opposite me.

I put back my cloak and showed him, by the light which streamed from the doorway, that I carried pistols as well as a sword.

'Good!' he answered briefly; 'then let us go. Do you walk on my left hand, my friend. It is a dark night, is it not?'

'Very dark, sire,' I said.

He made no answer to this, and we started, proceeding with caution until we had crossed the narrow bridge, and then with greater freedom and at a better pace. The slenderness of the attendance at Court that evening, and the cold wind, which swept even the narrowest streets and drove roisterers indoors, rendered it unlikely that we should be stopped or molested by any except professed thieves; and for these I was prepared. The king showed no inclination to talk; and keeping silence myself out of respect, I had time to calculate the chances and to consider whether his Majesty would succeed where I had failed.

This calculation, which was not inconsistent with the keenest watchfulness on my part whenever we turned a corner or passed the mouth of an alley, was brought to an end by our safe arrival at the house. Briefly apologising to the king for the meanness and darkness of the staircase, I begged leave to precede him, and rapidly mounted until I met Maignan. Whispering to him that all was well, I did not wait to hear his answer, but, bidding him be on the watch, I led the king on with as much deference as was possible until we stood at the door of mademoiselle's apartment, which I have elsewhere stated to consist of an outer and inner room. The door was opened by Simon Fleix, and him I promptly sent out. Then, standing aside and uncovering, I begged the king to enter.

He did so, still wearing his hat and mask, and I followed and secured the door. A lamp hanging from the ceiling diffused an imperfect light through the room, which was smaller but more comfortable in appearance than that which I rented overhead. I observed that Fanchette, whose harsh countenance looked more forbidding than usual, occupied a stool which she had set in a strange fashion against the inner door; but I thought no more of this at the moment, my attention passing quickly to mademoiselle, who sat crouching before the fire, enveloped in a large outdoor cloak, as if she felt the cold. Her back was towards us, and she was, or pretended to be, still ignorant of our

presence. With a muttered word I pointed her out to the king, and went towards her with him.

'Mademoiselle,' I said in a low voice, 'Mademoiselle de la Vire! I have the honour——'

She would not turn, and I stopped. Clearly she heard, but she betrayed that she did so only by drawing her cloak more closely round her. Primed by my respect for the king, I touched her lightly on the shoulder. 'Mademoiselle!' I said impatiently, 'you are not aware of it, but——'

She shook herself free from my hand with so rude a gesture that I broke off, and stood gaping foolishly at her. The king smiled, and nodding to me to step back a pace, took the task on himself. 'Mademoiselle,' he said with dignity, 'I am not accustomed——'

His voice had a magical effect. Before he could add another word she sprang up as if she had been struck, and faced us, a cry of alarm on her lips. Simultaneously we both cried out too, for it was not mademoiselle at all. The woman who confronted us, her hand on her mask, her eyes glittering through the slits, was of a taller and fuller figure. We stared at her. Then a lock of bright golden hair which had escaped from the hood of her cloak gave us the clue. 'Madame!' the king cried.

'Madame de Bruhl!' I echoed, my astonishment greater than his.

Seeing herself known, she began with trembling fingers to undo the fastenings of her mask; but the king, who had hitherto displayed a trustfulness I had not expected in him, had taken alarm at sight of her, as at a thing unlooked for, and of which I had not warned him. 'How is this?' he said harshly, drawing back a pace from her and regarding me with anger and distrust. 'Is this some pretty arrangement of yours, sir? Am I an intruder at an assignation, or is this a trap with M. de Bruhl in the background? Answer, sirrah!' he continued, working himself rapidly into a passion. 'Which am I to understand is the case?'

'Neither, sire,' I answered with as much dignity as I could assume, utterly surprised and mystified as I was by Madame's presence. 'Your Majesty wrongs Madame de Bruhl as much by the one suspicion as you injure me by the other. I am equally in the dark with you, sire, and as little expected to see madame here.'

'I came, sire,' she said proudly, addressing herself to the king, and ignoring me, 'out of no love to M. de Marsac, but as any person bearing a message to him might come. Nor can you, sire,' she added with spirit, 'feel half as much surprise at seeing me here, as I at seeing your Majesty.'

'I can believe that,' the king answered drily. 'I would you had not seen me.'

'The King of France is seen only when he chooses,' she replied, curtseying to the ground.

'Good,' he answered. 'Let it be so, and you will oblige the King of France, madame. But enough,' he continued, turning from her to me; 'since this is not the lady I came to see, M. de Marsac, where is she?'

'In the inner room, sire, I opine,' I said, advancing to Fanchette with more misgiving at heart than my manner evinced. 'Your mistress is here, is she not?' I continued, addressing the woman sharply.

'Ay, and will not come out,' she rejoined, sturdily keeping her place.

'Nonsense!' I said. 'Tell her——'

'You may tell her what you please,' she replied, refusing to budge an inch. 'She can hear.'

'But, woman!' I cried impatiently, 'you do not understand. I *must* speak with her. I must speak with her at once! On business of the highest importance.'

'As you please,' she said rudely, still keeping her seat. 'I have told you you can speak.'

Perhaps I felt as foolish on this occasion as ever in my life; and surely never was man placed in a more ridiculous position. After overcoming numberless obstacles, and escaping as many perils, I had brought the king here, a

feat beyond my highest hopes—only to be baffled and defeated by a waiting-woman! I stood irresolute; witless and confused; while the king waited half angry and half amused, and madame kept her place by the entrance, to which she had retreated.

I was delivered from my dilemma by the curiosity which is, providentially perhaps, a part of woman's character, and which led mademoiselle to interfere herself. Keenly on the watch inside, she had heard part of what passed between us, and been rendered inquisitive by the sound of a strange man's voice, and by the deference which she could discern I paid to the visitor. At this moment, she cried out, accordingly, to know who was there; and Fanchette, seeming to take this as a command, rose and dragged her stool aside, saying peevishly and without any increase of respect, 'There, I told you she could hear.'

'Who is it?' mademoiselle asked again, in a raised voice.

I was about to answer when the king signed to me to stand back, and, advancing himself, knocked gently on the door. 'Open, I pray you, mademoiselle,' he said courteously.

'Who is there?' she cried again, her voice trembling.

'It is I, the king,' he answered softly; but in that tone of majesty which belongs not to the man, but to the descendant, and seems to be the outcome of centuries of command.

She uttered an exclamation and slowly, and with seeming reluctance, turned the key in the lock. It grated, and the door opened. I caught a glimpse for an instant of her pale face and bright eyes, and then his Majesty, removing his hat, passed in and closed the door; and I withdrew to the farther end of the room, where madame continued to stand by the entrance.

I entertained a suspicion, I remember, and not unnaturally, that she had come to my lodging as her husband's spy; but her first words when I joined her dispelled this. 'Quick!' she said with an imperious gesture. 'Hear me and let me go! I have waited long enough for you, and

suffered enough through you. As for that woman in there, she is mad, and her servant too! Now, listen to me. You spoke to me honestly to-day, and I have come to repay you. You have an appointment with my husband to-morrow at Chaverny. Is it not so?' she added impatiently.

I replied that it was so.

'You are to go with one friend,' she went on, tearing the glove she had taken off, to strips in her excitement. 'He is to meet you with one also?'

'Yes,' I assented reluctantly, 'at the bridge, madame.'

'Then do not go,' she rejoined emphatically. 'Shame on me that I should betray my husband; but it were worse to send an innocent man to his death. He will meet you with one sword only, according to his challenge, but there will be those under the bridge who will make certain work. There, I have betrayed him now!' she continued bitterly. 'It is done. Let me go!'

'Nay, but, madame,' I said, feeling more concerned for her, on whom from the first moment of meeting her I had brought nothing but misfortune, than surprised by this new treachery on his part, 'will you not run some risk in returning to him? Is there nothing I can do for you—no step I can take for your protection?'

'None!' she said repellently and almost rudely, 'except to speed my going.'

'But you will not pass through the streets alone?'

She laughed so bitterly my heart ached for her. 'The unhappy are always safe,' she said.

Remembering how short a time it was since I had surprised her in the first happiness of wedded love, I felt for her all the pity it was natural I should feel. But the responsibility under which his Majesty's presence and the charge of mademoiselle laid me forbade me to indulge in the luxury of evincing my gratitude. Gladly would I have escorted her back to her home—even if I could not make that home again what it had been, or restore her husband to the pinnacle from which I had dashed him—but I dared

not do this. I was forced to content myself with less, and was about to offer to send one of my men with her, when a hurried knocking at the outer door arrested the words on my lips.

Signing to her to stand still, I listened. The knocking was repeated, and grew each moment more urgent. There was a little grille, strongly wired, in the upper part of the door, and this I was about to open in order to learn what was amiss, when Simon's voice reached me from the farther side imploring me to open the door quickly. Doubting the lad's prudence, yet afraid to refuse lest I should lose some warning he had to give, I paused a second, and then undid the fastenings. The moment the door gave way he fell in bodily, crying out to me to bar it behind him. I caught a glimpse through the gap of a glare as of torches, and saw by this light half a dozen flushed faces in the act of rising above the edge of the landing. The men who owned them raised a shout of triumph at sight of me, and, clearing the upper steps at a bound, made a rush for the door. But in vain. We had just time to close it and drop the two stout bars. In a moment, in a second, the fierce outcry fell to a dull roar; and safe for the time, we had leisure to look in one another's faces and learn the different aspects of alarm. Madame was white to the lips, while Simon's eyes seemed starting from his head, and he shook in every limb with terror.

At first, on my asking him what it meant, he could not speak. But that would not do, and I was in the act of seizing him by the collar to force an answer from him when the inner door opened, and the king came out, his face wearing an air of so much cheerfulness as proved both his satisfaction with mademoiselle's story and his ignorance of all we were about. In a word he had not yet taken the least alarm; but seeing Simon in my hands, and madame leaning against the wall by the door like one deprived of life, he stood and cried out in surprise to know what it was.

'I fear we are besieged, sire,' I answered desperately,

feeling my anxieties increased a hundredfold by his appearance—'but by whom I cannot say. This lad knows, however,' I continued, giving Simon a vicious shake, 'and he shall speak. Now, trembler,' I said to him, 'tell your tale?'

'The Provost-Marshal!' he stammered, terrified afresh by the king's presence: for Henry had removed his mask. 'I was on guard below. I had come up a few steps to be out of the cold, when I heard them enter. There are a round score of them.'

I cried out a great oath, asking him why he had not gone up and warned Maignan, who with his men was now cut off from us in the rooms above. 'You fool!' I continued, almost beside myself with rage, 'if you had not come to this door they would have mounted to my rooms and beset them! What is this folly about the Provost-Marshal?'

'He is there,' Simon answered, cowering away from me, his face working.

I thought he was lying, and had merely fancied this in his fright. But the assailants at this moment began to hail blows on the door, calling on us to open, and using such volleys of threats as penetrated even the thickness of the oak; driving the blood from the women's cheeks, and arresting the king's step in a manner which did not escape me. Among their cries I could plainly distinguish the words, 'In the king's name!' which bore out Simon's statement.

At the moment I drew comfort from this; for if we had merely to deal with the law we had that on our side which was above it. And I speedily made up my mind what to do. 'I think the lad speaks the truth, sire,' I said coolly. 'This is only your Majesty's Provost-Marshal. The worst to be feared, therefore, is that he may learn your presence here before you would have it known. It should not be a matter of great difficulty, however, to bind him to silence, and if you will please to mask, I will open the grille and speak with him.'

The king, who had taken his stand in the middle of the room, and seemed dazed and confused by the suddenness of the alarm and the uproar, assented with a brief word. Accordingly I was preparing to open the grille when Madame de Bruhl seized my arm, and forcibly pushed me back from it.

'What would you do?' she cried, her face full of terror. 'Do you not hear? He is there.'

'Who is there?' I said, startled more by her manner than her words.

'Who?' she answered; 'who should be there? My husband! I hear his voice, I tell you! He has tracked me here! He has found me, and will kill me!'

'God forbid!' I said, doubting if she had really heard his voice. To make sure, I asked Simon if he had seen him; and my heart sank when I heard from him too that Bruhl was of the party. For the first time I became fully sensible of the danger which threatened us. For the first time, looking round the ill-lit room on the women's terrified faces, and the king's masked figure instinct with ill-repressed nervousness, I recognised how hopelessly we were enmeshed. Fortune had served Bruhl so well that, whether he knew it or not, he had us all trapped—alike the king whom he desired to compromise, and his wife whom he hated, mademoiselle who had once escaped him, and me who had twice thwarted him. It was little to be wondered at if my courage sank as I looked from one to another, and listened to the ominous creaking of the door, as the stout panels complained under the blows rained upon them. For my first duty, and that which took the *pas* of all others, was to the king—to save him harmless. How, then, was I to be answerable for mademoiselle, how protect Madame de Bruhl?—how, in a word, redeem all those pledges in which my honour was concerned?

It was the thought of the Provost-Marshal which at this moment rallied my failing spirits. I remembered that until the mystery of his presence here in alliance with

Bruhl was explained there was no need to despair; and turning briskly to the king I begged him to favour me by standing with the women in a corner which was not visible from the door. He complied mechanically, and in a manner which I did not like; but lacking time to weigh trifles, I turned to the grille and opened it without more ado.

The appearance of my face at the trap was greeted with a savage cry of recognition, which subsided as quickly into silence. It was followed by a momentary pushing to and fro among the crowd outside, which in its turn ended in the Provost-Marshal coming to the front. 'In the king's name!' he said fussily.

'What is it?' I replied, eyeing rather the flushed, eager faces which scowled over his shoulders than himself. The light of two links, borne by some of the party, shone ruddily on the heads of the halberds, and, flaring up from time to time, filled all the place with wavering, smoky light. 'What do you want?' I continued, 'rousing my lodging at this time of night?'

'I hold a warrant for your arrest,' he replied bluntly. 'Resistance will be vain. If you do not surrender I shall send for a ram to break in the door.'

'Where is your order?' I said sharply. 'The one you held this morning was cancelled by the king himself.'

'Suspended only,' he answered. 'Suspended only. It was given out to me again this evening for instant execution. And I am here in pursuance of it, and call on you to surrender.'

'Who delivered it to you?' I retorted.

'M. de Villequier,' he answered readily. 'And here it is. Now, come, sir,' he continued, 'you are only making matters worse. Open to us.'

'Before I do so,' I said drily, 'I should like to know what part in the pageant my friend M. de Bruhl, whom I see on the stairs yonder, proposes to play. And there is my old friend Fresnoy,' I added. 'And I see one or two others whom I know, M. Provost. Before I surrender I must

know among other things what M. de Bruhl's business is here.'

'It is the business of every loyal man to execute the king's warrant,' the Provost answered evasively. 'It is yours to surrender, and mine to lodge you in the Castle. But I am loth to have a disturbance. I will give you until that torch goes out, if you like, to make up your mind. At the end of that time, if you do not surrender, I shall batter down the door.'

'You will give the torch fair play?' I said, noting its condition.

He assented; and thanking him sternly for this indulgence, I closed the grille.

CHAPTER XXV.

TERMS OF SURRENDER.

I STILL had my hand on the trap when a touch on the shoulder caused me to turn, and in a moment apprised me of the imminence of a new peril; a peril of such a kind that, summoning all my resolution, I could scarcely hope to cope with it. Henry was at my elbow. He had taken off his mask, and a single glance at his countenance warned me that that had happened of which I had already felt some fear. The glitter of intense excitement shone in his eyes. His face, darkly-flushed and wet with sweat, betrayed overmastering emotion, while his teeth, tight clenched in the effort to restrain the fit of trembling which possessed him, showed between his lips like those of a corpse. The novelty of the danger which menaced him, the absence of his gentlemen, and of all the familiar faces and surroundings without which he never moved, the hour, the mean house, and his isolation among strangers, had roved too much for nerves long weakened by his course of

living, and for a courage, proved indeed in the field, but unequal to a sudden stress. Though he still strove to preserve his dignity, it was alarmingly plain to my eyes that he was on the point of losing, if he had not already lost, all self-command.

'Open!' he muttered between his teeth, pointing impatiently to the trap with the hand with which he had already touched me. 'Open, I say, sir!'

I stared at him, startled and confounded. 'But your Majesty,' I ventured to stammer, 'forgets that I have not yet——'

'Open, I say!' he repeated passionately. 'Do you hear me, sir? I desire that this door be opened.' His lean hand shook as with the palsy, so that the gems on it twinkled in the light and rattled as he spoke.

I looked helplessly from him to the women and back again, seeing in a flash all the dangers which might follow from the discovery of his presence there—dangers which I had not before formulated to myself, but which seemed in a moment to range themselves with the utmost clearness before my eyes. At the same time I saw what seemed to me to be a way of escape; and emboldened by the one and the other, I kept my hand on the trap and strove to parley with him.

'Nay, but, sire,' I said hurriedly, yet still with as much deference as I could command, 'I beg you to permit me first to repeat what I have seen. M. de Bruhl is without, and I counted six men whom I believe to be his following. They are ruffians ripe for any crime; and I implore your Majesty rather to submit to a short imprisonment——'

I paused struck dumb on that word, confounded by the passion which lightened in the king's face. My ill-chosen expression had indeed applied the spark to his wrath. Predisposed to suspicion by a hundred treacheries, he forgot the perils outside in the one idea which on the instant possessed his mind; that I would confine his person, and had brought him hither for no other purpose. He

glared round him with eyes full of rage and fear, and his trembling lips breathed rather than spoke the word 'Imprison?'

Unluckily, a trifling occurrence added at this moment to his disorder, and converted it into frenzy. Someone outside fell heavily against the door; this, causing madame to utter a low shriek, seemed to shatter the last remnant of the king's self-control. Stamping his foot on the floor, he cried to me with the utmost wildness to open the door—by which I had hitherto kept my place.

But, wrongly or rightly, I was still determined to put off opening it; and I raised my hands with the intention of making a last appeal to him. He misread the gesture, and retreating a step, with the greatest suddenness whipped out his sword, and in a moment had the point at my breast, and his wrist drawn back to thrust.

It has always been my belief that he would not have dealt the blow, but that the mere touch of the hilt, awaking the courage which he undoubtedly possessed, and which did not desert him in his last moments, would have recalled him to himself. But the opportunity was not given him, for while the blade yet quivered, and I stood motionless, controlling myself by an effort, my knee half bent and my eyes on his, Mademoiselle de la Vire sprang forward at his back, and with a loud scream clutched his elbow. The king, surprised, and ignorant who held him, flung up his point wildly, and striking the lamp above his head with his blade, shattered it in an instant, bringing down the pottery with a crash and reducing the room to darkness; while the screams of the women, and the knowledge that we had a madman among us, peopled the blackness with a hundred horrors.

Fearing above all for mademoiselle, I made my way as soon as I could recover my wits to the embers of the fire, and regardless of the king's sword, which I had a vague idea was darting about in the darkness, I searched for and found a half-burnt stick, which I blew into a blaze. With

this, still keeping my back to the room, I contrived to light a taper that I had noticed standing by the hearth; and then, and then only, I turned to see what I had to confront.

Mademoiselle de la Vire stood in a corner, half-fierce, half-terrified, and wholly flushed. She had her hand wrapped up in a 'kerchief already stained with blood; and from this I gathered that the king in his frenzy had wounded her slightly. Standing before her mistress, with her hair bristling, like a wild-cat's fur, and her arms akimbo, was Fanchette, her harsh face and square form instinct with fury and defiance. Madame de Bruhl and Simon cowered against the wall not far from them; and in a chair, into which he had apparently just thrown himself, sat the king, huddled up and collapsed, the point of his sword trailing on the ground beside him, and his nerveless hand scarce retaining force to grip the pommel.

In a moment I made up my mind what to do, and going to him in silence, I laid my pistols, sword, and dagger on a stool by his side. Then I knelt.

'The door, sire,' I said, 'is there. It is for your Majesty to open it when you please. Here, too, sire, are my weapons. I am your prisoner, the Provost-Marshal is outside, and you can at a word deliver me to him. Only one thing I beg, sire,' I continued earnestly, 'that your Majesty will treat as a delusion the idea that I meditated for a moment disrespect or violence to your person.'

He looked at me dully, his face pale, his eyes fish-like. 'Sanctus, man!' he muttered, 'why did you raise your hand?'

'Only to implore your Majesty to pause a moment,' I answered, watching the intelligence return slowly to his face. 'If you will deign to listen I can explain in half a dozen words, sire. M. de Bruhl's men are six or seven, the Provost has eight or nine; but the former are the wilder blades, and if M. de Bruhl find your Majesty in my lodging, and infer his own defeat, he will be capable of any desperate stroke. Your person would hardly be safe in his company through the streets. And there is another

consideration,' I went on, observing with joy that the king listened, and was gradually regaining his composure. 'That is, the secrecy you desired to preserve, sire, until this matter should be well advanced. M. de Rosny laid the strictest injunctions on me in that respect, fearing an *émeute* in Blois should your Majesty's plans become known.'

'You speak fairly,' the king answered with returning energy, though he avoided looking at the women. 'Bruhl is likely enough to raise one. But how am I to get out, sir?' he continued, querulously. 'I cannot remain here. I shall be missed, man! I am not a hedge-captain, neither sought nor wanted!'

'If your Majesty would trust me?' I said slowly and with hesitation.

'Trust you!' he retorted peevishly, holding up his hands and gazing intently at his nails, of the shape and whiteness of which he was prouder than any woman. 'Have I not trusted you? If I had not trusted you, should I have been here? But that you were a Huguenot—God forgive me for saying it!—I would have seen you in hell before I would have come here with you!'

I confess to having heard this testimony to the Religion with a pride which made me forget for a moment the immediate circumstances—the peril in which we stood, the gloomy room darkly lighted by a single candle, the scared faces in the background, even the king's huddled figure, in which dejection and pride struggled for expression. For a moment only; then I hastened to reply, saying that I doubted not I could still extricate his Majesty without discovery.

'In Heaven's name do it, then!' he answered sharply. 'Do what you like, man! Only get me back into the castle, and it shall not be a Huguenot will entice me out again. I am over old for these adventures!'

A fresh attack on the door taking place as he said this induced me to lose no time in explaining my plan, which he was good enough to approve, after again upbraiding me

for bringing him into such a dilemma. Fearing lest the door should give way prematurely, notwithstanding the bars I had provided for it, and goaded on by Madame de Bruhl's face, which evinced the utmost terror, I took the candle and attended his Majesty into the inner room; where I placed my pistols beside him, but silently resumed my sword and dagger. I then returned for the women, and indicating by signs that they were to enter, held the door open for them.

Mademoiselle, whose bandaged hand I could not regard without emotion, though the king's presence and the respect I owed him forbade me to utter so much as a word, advanced readily until she reached the doorway abreast of me. There, however, looking back, and seeing Madame de Bruhl following her, she stopped short, and darting a haughty glance at me, muttered, 'And—that lady? Are we to be shut up together, sir?'

'Mademoiselle,' I answered quickly in the low tone she had used herself, 'have I ever asked anything dishonourable of you?'

She seemed by a slight movement of the head to answer in the negative.

'Nor do I now,' I replied with earnestness. 'I entrust to your care a lady who has risked great peril for *us;* and the rest I leave to you.'

She looked me very keenly in the face for a second, and then, without answering, she passed on, Madame and Fanchette following her in that order. I closed the door and turned to Simon; who by my direction had blown the embers of the fire into a blaze so as to partially illumine the room, in which only he and I now remained. The lad seemed afraid to meet my eye, and owing to the scene at which he had just assisted, or to the onslaught on the door, which grew each moment more furious, betrayed greater restlessness than I had lately observed in him. I did not doubt his fidelity, however, or his devotion to mademoiselle; and the orders I had to give him were simple enough.

'This is what you have got to do,' I said, my hand already on the bars. 'The moment I am outside secure this door. After that, open to no one except Maignan. When he applies, let him in with caution, and bid him, as he loves M. de Rosny, take his men as soon as the coast is clear, and guard the King of France to the castle. Charge him to be brave and wary, for his life will answer for the king's.'

Twice I repeated this; then fearing lest the Provost-Marshal should make good his word and apply a ram to the door, I opened the trap. A dozen angry voices hailed my appearance, and this with so much violence and impatience that it was some time before I could get a hearing; the knaves threatening me if I would not instantly open, and persisting that I should do so without more words. Their leader at length quieted them, but it was plain that his patience too was worn out. 'Do you surrender or do you not?' he said. 'I am not going to stay out of my bed all night for you!'

'I warn you,' I answered, 'that the order you have there has been cancelled by the king!'

'That is not my business,' he rejoined hardily.

'No, but it will be when the king sends for you to-morrow morning,' I retorted; at which he looked somewhat moved. 'However, I will surrender to you on two conditions,' I continued, keenly observing the coarse faces of his following. 'First, that you let me keep my arms until we reach the gate-house, I giving you my parole to come with you quietly. That is number one.'

'Well,' the Provost-Marshal said more civilly, 'I have no objection to that.'

'Secondly, that you do not allow your men to break into my lodgings. I will come out quietly, and so an end. Your order does not direct you to sack my goods.'

'Tut, tut!' he replied; 'I want you to come out. I do not want to go in.'

'Then draw your men back to the stairs,' I said. 'And if you keep terms with me, I will uphold you to-morrow.

For your orders will certainly bring you into trouble. M. de Retz, who procured it this morning, is away, you know. M. de Villequier may be gone to-morrow. But depend upon it, M. de Rambouillet will be here!'

The remark was well timed and to the point. It startled the man as much as I had hoped it would. Without raising any objection he ordered his men to fall back and guard the stairs; and I on my side began to undo the fastenings of the door.

The matter was not to be so easily concluded, however; for Bruhl's rascals, in obedience, no doubt, to a sign given by their leader, who stood with Fresnoy on the upper flight of stairs, refused to withdraw; and even hustled the Provost-Marshal's men when the latter would have obeyed the order. The officer, already heated by delay, replied by laying about him with his staff, and in a twinkling there seemed to be every prospect of a very pretty *mêlée*, the end of which it was impossible to foresee.

Reflecting, however, that if Bruhl's men routed their opponents our position might be made worse rather than better, I did not act on my first impulse, which was to see the matter out where I was. Instead, I seized the opportunity to let myself out, while Simon fastened the door behind me. The Provost-Marshal was engaged at the moment in a wordy dispute with Fresnoy; whose villainous countenance, scarred by the wound which I had given him at Chizé, and flushed with passion, looked its worst by the light of the single torch which remained. In one respect the villain had profited by his present patronage, for he was decked out in a style of tawdry magnificence. But I have always remarked this about dress, that while a shabby exterior does not entirely obscure a gentleman, the extreme of fashion is powerless to gild a knave.

Seeing me on a sudden at the Provost's elbow, he recoiled with a change of countenance so ludicrous that that officer was himself startled, and only held his ground on my saluting him civilly and declaring myself his prisoner. I

added a warning that he should look to the torch which remained; seeing that if it failed we were both like to have our throats cut in the confusion.

He took the hint promptly, and calling the link-man to his side prepared to descend, bidding Fresnoy and his men, who remained clumped at the head of the stairs, make way for us without ado. They seemed much inclined, however, to dispute our passage, and replying to his invectives with rough taunts, displayed so hostile a demeanour that the Provost, between regard for his own importance and respect for Bruhl, appeared for a moment at a loss what to do; and seemed rather relieved than annoyed when I begged leave to say a word to M. de Bruhl.

'If you can bring his men to reason,' he replied testily, 'speak your fill to him!'

Stepping to the foot of the upper flight, on which Bruhl retained his position, I saluted him formally. He returned my greeting with a surly, watchful look only, and drawing his cloak more tightly round him affected to gaze down at me with disdain; which ill concealed, however, both the triumph he felt and the hopes of vengeance he entertained. I was especially anxious to learn whether he had tracked his wife hither, or was merely here in pursuance of his general schemes against me, and to this end I asked him with as much irony as I could compass to what I was to attribute his presence. 'I am afraid I cannot stay to offer you hospitality,' I continued; 'but for that you have only your friend M. Villequier to thank!'

'I am greatly obliged to you,' he answered with a devilish smile, 'but do not let that affect you. When you are gone I propose to help myself, my friend, to whatever takes my taste.'

'Do you?' I retorted coolly—not that I was unaffected by the threat and the villainous hint which underlay the words, but that, fully expecting them, I was ready with my answer. 'We will see about that.' And therewith I raised my fingers to my lips, and, whistling shrilly, cried 'Maignan! Maignan!' in a clear voice.

I had no need to cry the name a third time, for before the Provost-Marshal could do more than start at this unexpected action, the landing above us rang under a heavy tread, and the man I called, descending the stairs swiftly, appeared on a sudden within arm's length of M. de Bruhl; who, turning with an oath, saw him, and involuntarily recoiled. At all times Maignan's hardy and confident bearing was of a kind to impress the strong; but on this occasion there was an added dash of recklessness in his manner which was not without its effect on the spectators. As he stood there smiling darkly over Bruhl's head, while his hand toyed carelessly with his dagger, and the torch shone ruddily on his burly figure, he was so clearly an antagonist in a thousand that, had I sought through Blois, I might not have found his fellow for strength and *sang-froid*. He let his black eyes rove from one to the other, but took heed of me only, saluting me with effusion and a touch of the Gascon which was in place here, if ever.

I knew how M. de Rosny dealt with him, and followed the pattern as far as I could. 'Maignan!' I said curtly, 'I have taken a lodging for to-night elsewhere. When I am gone you will call out your men and watch this door. If anyone tries to force an entrance you will do your duty.'

'You may consider it done,' he replied.

'Even if the person be M. de Bruhl here,' I continued.

'Precisely.'

'You will remain on guard,' I went on, 'until to-morrow morning if M. de Bruhl remains here; but whenever he leaves you will take your orders from the persons inside, and follow them implicitly.'

'Your Excellency's mind may be easy,' he answered, handling his dagger.

Dismissing him with a nod, I turned with a smile to M. de Bruhl, and saw that between rage at this unexpected check and chagrin at the insult put upon him, his discomfiture was as complete as I could wish. As for Fresnoy, if he had seriously intended to dispute our passage, he was

no longer in the mood for the attempt. Yet I did not let his master off without one more prick. 'That being settled, M. de Bruhl,' I said pleasantly, 'I may bid you good evening. You will doubtless honour me at Chaverny to-morrow. But we will first let Maignan look under the bridge!'

CHAPTER XXVI.

MEDITATIONS.

EITHER the small respect I had paid M. de Bruhl, or the words I had let fall respecting the possible disappearance of M. Villequier, had had so admirable an effect on the Provost-Marshal's mind that from the moment of leaving my lodgings he treated me with the utmost civility; permitting me even to retain my sword, and assigning me a sleeping-place for the night in his own apartments at the Gate-house.

Late as it was, I could not allow so much politeness to pass unacknowledged. I begged leave, therefore, to distribute a small gratuity among his attendants, and requested him to do me the honour of drinking a bottle of wine with me. This being speedily procured, at such an expense as is usual in these places, where prisoners pay, according as they are rich or poor, in purse or person, kept us sitting for an hour, and finally sent us to our pallets perfectly satisfied with one another.

The events of the day, however, and particularly one matter, on which I have not dwelt at length, proved as effectual to prevent my sleeping as if I had been placed in the dampest cell below the castle. So much had been crowded into a time so short that it seemed as if I had had until now no opportunity of considering whither I was being hurried, or what fortune awaited me at the end of this turmoil. From the first appearance of M. d'Agen in

the morning, with the startling news that the Provost-Marshal was seeking me, to my final surrender and encounter with Bruhl on the stairs, the chain of events had run out so swiftly that I had scarcely had time at any particular period to consider how I stood, or the full import of the latest check or victory. Now that I had leisure I lived the day over again, and, recalling its dangers and disappointments, felt thankful that all had ended so fairly.

I had the most perfect confidence in Maignan, and did not doubt that Bruhl would soon weary, if he had not already wearied, of a profitless siege. In an hour at most —and it was not yet midnight—the king would be free to go home; and with that would end, as far as he was concerned, the mission with which M. de Rosny had honoured me. The task of communicating his Majesty's decision to the King of Navarre would doubtless be entrusted to M. de Rambouillet, or some person of similar position and influence; and in the same hands would rest the honour and responsibility of the treaty which, as we all know now, gave after a brief interval and some bloodshed, and one great providence, a lasting peace to France. But it must ever be—and I recognised this that night with a bounding heart, which told of some store of youth yet unexhausted —a matter of lasting pride to me that I, whose career but now seemed closed in failure, had proved the means of conferring so especial a benefit on my country and religion.

Remembering, however, the King of Navarre's warning that I must not look to him for reward, I felt greatly doubtful in what direction the scene would next open to me; my main dependence being upon M. de Rosny's promise that he would make my fortune his own care. Tired of the Court at Blois, and the atmosphere of intrigue and treachery which pervaded it, and with which I hoped I had now done, I was still at a loss to see how I could recross the Loire in face of the Vicomte de Turenne's enmity. I might have troubled myself much more with speculating upon this point had I not found—in close connection with

it—other and more engrossing food for thought in the capricious behaviour of Mademoiselle de la Vire.

To that behaviour it seemed to me that I now held the clue. I suspected with as much surprise as pleasure that only one construction could be placed upon it—a construction which had strongly occurred to me on catching sight of her face when she intervened between me and the king.

Tracing the matter back to the moment of our meeting in the antechamber at St. Jean d'Angely, I remembered the jest which Mathurine had uttered at our joint expense. Doubtless it had dwelt in mademoiselle's mind, and exciting her animosity against me had prepared her to treat me with contumely when, contrary to all probability, we met again, and she found herself placed in a manner in my hands. It had inspired her harsh words and harsher looks on our journey northwards, and contributed with her native pride to the low opinion I had formed of her when I contrasted her with my honoured mother.

But I began to think it possible that the jest had worked in another way as well, by keeping me before her mind and impressing upon her the idea—after my re-appearance at Chizé more particularly—that our fates were in some way linked. Assuming this, it was not hard to understand her manner at Rosny when, apprised that I was no impostor, and regretting her former treatment of me, she still recoiled from the feelings which she began to recognise in her own breast. From that time, and with this clue, I had no difficulty in tracing her motives, always supposing that this suspicion, upon which I dwelt with feelings of wonder and delight, were well founded.

Middle-aged and grizzled, with the best of my life behind me, I had never dared to think of her in this way before. Poor and comparatively obscure, I had never raised my eyes to the wide possessions said to be hers. Even now I felt myself dazzled and bewildered by the prospect so suddenly unveiled. I could scarcely, without vertigo, recall her as I had last seen her, with her hand wounded in my

defence; nor, without emotions painful in their intensity, fancy myself restored to the youth of which I had taken leave, and to the rosy hopes and plannings which visit most men once only, and then in early years. Hitherto I had deemed such things the lot of others.

Daylight found me—and no wonder—still diverting myself with these charming speculations; which had for me, be it remembered, all the force of novelty. The sun chanced to rise that morning in a clear sky, and brilliantly for the time of year; and words fail me when I look back, and try to describe how delicately this simple fact enhanced my pleasure! I sunned myself in the beams, which penetrated my barred window; and tasting the early freshness with a keen and insatiable appetite, I experienced to the full that peculiar aspiration after goodness which Providence allows such moments to awaken in us in youth; but rarely when time and the camp have blunted the sensibilities.

I had not yet arrived at the stage at which difficulties have to be reckoned up, and the chief drawback to the tumult of joy I felt took the shape of regret that my mother no longer lived to feel the emotions proper to the time, and to share in the prosperity which she had so often and so fondly imagined. Nevertheless, I felt myself drawn closer to her. I recalled with the most tender feelings, and at greater leisure than had before been the case, her last days and words, and particularly the appeal she had uttered on mademoiselle's behalf. And I vowed, if it were possible, to pay a visit to her grave before leaving the neighbourhood, that I might there devote a few moments to the thought of the affection which had consecrated all women in my eyes.

I was presently interrupted in these reflections by a circumstance which proved in the end diverting enough, though far from reassuring at the first blush. It began in a dismal rattling of chains in the passage below and on the stairs outside my room; which were paved, like the rest of the building, with stone. I waited with impatience and some uneasiness to see what would come of this; and my sur-

prise may be imagined when, the door being unlocked, gave entrance to a man in whom I recognised on the instant deaf Matthew—the villain whom I had last seen with Fresnoy in the house in the Rue Valois. Amazed at seeing him here, I sprang to my feet in fear of some treachery, and for a moment apprehended that the Provost-Marshal had basely given me over to Bruhl's custody. But a second glance informing me that the man was in irons—hence the noise I had heard—I sat down again to see what would happen.

It then appeared that he merely brought me my breakfast, and was a prisoner in less fortunate circumstances than myself; but as he pretended not to recognise me, and placed the things before me in obdurate silence, and I had no power to make him hear, I failed to learn how he came to be in durance. The Provost-Marshal, however, came presently to visit me, and brought me in token that the good-fellowship of the evening still existed a pouch of the Queen's herb; which I accepted for politeness' sake rather than from any virtue I found in it. And from him I learned how the rascal came to be in his charge.

It appeared that Fresnoy, having no mind to be hampered with a wounded man, had deposited him on the night of our *mêlée* at the door of a hospital attached to a religious house in that part or the town. The Fathers had opened to him, but before taking him in put, according to their custom, certain questions. Matthew had been primed with the right answers to these questions, which were commonly a form; but, unhappily for him, the Superior by chance or mistake began with the wrong one.

'You are not a Huguenot, my son?' he said.

'In God's name, I am!' Matthew replied with simplicity, believing he was asked if he was a Catholic.

'What?' the scandalised Prior ejaculated, crossing himself in doubt, 'are you not a true son of the Church?'

'Never!' quoth our deaf friend—thinking all went well

'A heretic!' cried the monk.

'Amen to that!' replied Matthew innocently; never doubting but that he was asked the third question, which was, commonly, whether he needed aid.

Naturally after this there was a very pretty commotion, and Matthew, vainly protesting that he was deaf, was hurried off to the Provost-Marshal's custody. Asked how he communicated with him, the Provost answered that he could not, but that his little godchild, a girl only eight years old, had taken a strange fancy to the rogue, and was never so happy as when talking to him by means of signs, of which she had invented a great number. I thought this strange at the time, but I had proof before the morning was out that it was true enough, and that the two were seldom apart, the little child governing this grim cut-throat with unquestioned authority.

After the Provost was gone I heard the man's fetters clanking again. This time he entered to remove my cup and plate, and surprised me by speaking to me. Maintaining his former sullenness, and scarcely looking at me, he said abruptly: 'You are going out again?'

I nodded assent.

'Do you remember a bald-faced bay horse that fell with you?' he muttered, keeping his dogged glance on the floor.

I nodded again.

'I want to sell the horse,' he said. 'There is not such another in Blois, no, nor in Paris! Touch it on the near hip with the whip and it will go down as if shot. At other times a child might ride it. It is in a stable, the third from the Three Pigeons, in the Ruelle Amancy. Fresnoy does not know where it is. He sent to ask yesterday, but I would not tell him.'

Some spark of human feeling which appeared in his lowering, brutal visage as he spoke of the horse led me to desire further information. Fortunately the little girl appeared at that moment at the door in search of her playfellow; and through her I learned that the man's motive for seeking to sell the horse was fear lest the dealer in

whose charge it stood should dispose of it to repay himself for its keep, and he, Matthew, lose it without return.

Still I did not understand why he applied to me, but I was well pleased when I learned the truth. Base as the knave was, he had an affection for the bay, which had been his only property for six years. Having this in his mind, he had conceived the idea that I should treat it well, and should not, because he was in prison and powerless, cheat him of the price.

In the end I agreed to buy the horse for ten crowns, paying as well what was due at the stable. I had it in my head to do something also for the man, being moved to this partly by an idea that there was good in him, and partly by the confidence he had seen fit to place in me, which seemed to deserve some return. But a noise below stairs diverted my attention. I heard myself named, and for the moment forgot the matter.

CHAPTER XXVII.

TO ME, MY FRIENDS!

I WAS impatient to learn who had come, and what was their errand with me; and being still in that state of exaltation in which we seem to hear and see more than at other times, I remarked a peculiar lagging in the ascending footsteps, and a lack of buoyancy, which was quick to communicate itself to my mind. A vague dread fell upon me as I stood listening. Before the door opened I had already conceived a score of disasters. I wondered that I had not inquired earlier concerning the king's safety, and in fine I experienced in a moment that complete reaction of the spirits which is too frequently consequent upon an excessive flow of gaiety.

I was prepared, therefore, for heavy looks, but not for the persons who wore them nor the strange bearing the latter displayed on entering. My visitors proved to be M. d'Agen and Simon Fleix. And so far well. But the former, instead of coming forward to greet me with the punctilious politeness which always characterised him, and which I had thought to be proof against every kind of surprise and peril, met me with downcast eyes and a countenance so gloomy as to augment my fears a hundredfold; since it suggested all those vague and formidable pains which M. de Rambouillet had hinted might await me in a prison. I thought nothing more probable than the entrance after them of a gaoler laden with gyves and handcuffs; and saluting M. François with a face which, do what I would, fashioned itself upon his, I had scarce composure sufficient to place the poor accommodation of my room at his disposal.

He thanked me; but he did it with so much gloom and so little naturalness that I grew more impatient with each laboured syllable. Simon Fleix had slunk to the window and turned his back on us. Neither seemed to have anything to say. But a state of suspense was one which I could least endure to suffer; and impatient of the constraint which my friend's manner was fast imparting to mine, I asked him at once and abruptly if his uncle had returned.

'He rode in about midnight,' he answered, tracing a pattern on the floor with the point of his riding-switch.

I felt some surprise on hearing this, since d'Agen was still dressed and armed for the road, and was without all those prettinesses which commonly marked his attire. But as he volunteered no further information, and did not even refer to the place in which he found me, or question me as to the adventures which had lodged me there, I let it pass, and asked him if his party had overtaken the deserters.

'Yes,' he answered, 'with no result.'

'And the king?'

'M. de Rambouillet is with him now,' he rejoined, still bending over his tracing.

This answer relieved the worst of my anxieties, but the manner of the speaker was so distrait and so much at variance with the studied *insouciance* which he usually affected, that I only grew more alarmed. I glanced at Simon Fleix, but he kept his face averted, and I could gather nothing from it; though I observed that he, too, was dressed for the road, and wore his arms. I listened, but I could hear no sounds which indicated that the Provost-Marshal was approaching. Then on a sudden I thought of Mademoiselle de la Vire. Could it be that Maignan had proved unequal to his task?

I started impetuously from my stool under the influence of the emotion which this thought naturally aroused, and seized M. d'Agen by the arm. 'What has happened?' I exclaimed. 'Is it Bruhl? Did he break into my lodgings last night? What!' I continued, staggering back as I read the confirmation of my fears in his face. 'He did?'

M. d'Agen, who had risen also, pressed my hand with convulsive energy. Gazing into my face, he held me a moment thus embraced, his manner a strange mixture of fierceness and emotion. 'Alas, yes,' he answered, 'he did, and took away those whom he found there! Those whom he found there, you understand! But M. de Rambouillet is on his way here, and in a few minutes you will be free. We will follow together. If we overtake them—well. If not, it will be time to talk.'

He broke off, and I stood looking at him, stunned by the blow, yet in the midst of my own horror and surprise retaining sense enough to wonder at the gloom on his brow and the passion which trembled in his words. What had this to do with him? 'But Bruhl?' I said at last, recovering myself with an effort—'how did he gain access to the room? I left it guarded.'

'By a ruse, while Maignan and his men were away,' was the answer. 'Only this lad of yours was there. Bruhl's men overpowered him.'

'Which way has Bruhl gone?' I muttered, my throat dry, my heart beating wildly.

He shook his head. 'All we know is that he passed through the south gate with eleven horsemen, two women, and six led horses, at daybreak this morning,' he answered. 'Maignan came to my uncle with the news, and M. de Rambouillet went at once, early as it was, to the king to procure your release. He should be here now.'

I looked at the barred window, the most horrible fears at my heart; from it to Simon Fleix, who stood beside it, his attitude expressing the utmost dejection. I went towards him. 'You hound!' I said in a low voice, 'how did it happen?'

To my surprise he fell in a moment on his knees, and raised his arm as though to ward off a blow. 'They imitated Maignan's voice,' he muttered hoarsely. 'We opened.'

'And you dare to come here and tell me!' I cried, scarcely restraining my passion. 'You, to whom I entrusted her. You, whom I thought devoted to her. You have destroyed her, man!'

He rose as suddenly as he had cowered down. His thin, nervous face underwent a startling change; growing on a sudden hard and rigid, while his eyes began to glitter with excitement. 'I—I have destroyed her? Ay, mon dieu! I *have*,' he cried, speaking to my face, and no longer flinching or avoiding my eye. 'You may kill me, if you like. You do not know all. It was I who stole the favour she gave you from your doublet, and then said M. de Rosny had taken it! It was I who told her you had given it away! It was I who brought her to the Little Sisters', that she might see you with Madame de Bruhl! It was I who did all, and destroyed her! Now you know! Do with me what you like!'

He opened his arms as though to receive a blow, while I stood before him astounded beyond measure by a disclosure so unexpected; full of righteous wrath and indignation,

and yet uncertain what I ought to do. 'Did you also let Bruhl into the room on purpose?' I cried at last.

'I?' he exclaimed, with a sudden flash of rage in his eyes. 'I would have died first!'

I do not know how I might have taken this confession; but at the moment there was a trampling of horses outside, and before I could answer him I heard M. de Rambouillet speaking in haughty tones, at the door below. The Provost-Marshal was with him, but his lower notes were lost in the ring of bridles and the stamping of impatient hoofs. I looked towards the door of my room, which stood ajar, and presently the two entered, the Marquis listening with an air of contemptuous indifference to the apologies which the other, who attended at his elbow, was pouring forth. M. de Rambouillet's face reflected none of the gloom and despondency which M. d'Agen's exhibited in so marked a degree. He seemed, on the contrary, full of gaiety and good-humour, and, coming forward and seeing me, embraced me with the utmost kindness and condescension.

'Ha! my friend,' he said cheerfully, 'so I find you here after all! But never fear. I am this moment from the king with an order for your release. His Majesty has told me all, making me thereby your lasting friend and debtor. As for this gentleman,' he continued, turning with a cold smile to the Provost-Marshal, who seemed to be trembling in his boots, 'he may expect an immediate order also. M. de Villequier has wisely gone a-hunting, and will not be back for a day or two.'

Racked as I was by suspense and anxiety, I could not assail him with immediate petitions. It behoved me first to thank him for his prompt intervention, and this in terms as warm as I could invent. Nor could I in justice fail to commend the Provost to him, representing the officer's conduct to me, and lauding his ability. All this, though my heart was sick with thought and fear and disappointment, and every minute seemed an age.

'Well, well,' the Marquis said with stately good-nature,

'we will lay the blame on Villequier then. He is an old fox, however, and ten to one he will go scot-free. It is not the first time he has played this trick. But I have not yet come to the end of my commission,' he continued pleasantly. 'His Majesty sends you this, M. de Marsac, and bade me say that he had loaded it for you.'

He drew from under his cloak as he spoke the pistol which I had left with the king, and which happened to be the same M. de Rosny had given me. I took it, marvelling impatiently at the careful manner in which he handled it; but in a moment I understood, for I found it loaded to the muzzle with gold-pieces, of which two or three fell and rolled upon the floor. Much moved by this substantial mark of the king's gratitude, I was nevertheless for pocketing them in haste; but the Marquis, to satisfy a little curiosity on his part, would have me count them, and brought the tale to a little over two thousand livres, without counting a ring set with precious stones which I found among them. This handsome present diverted my thoughts from Simon Fleix, but could not relieve the anxiety I felt on mademoiselle's account. The thought of her position so tortured me that M. de Rambouillet began to perceive my state of mind, and hastened to assure me that before going to the Court he had already issued orders calculated to assist me.

'You desire to follow this lady, I understand?' he said. 'What with the king, who is enraged beyond the ordinary by this outrage, and François there, who seemed beside himself when he heard the news, I have not got any very clear idea of the position.'

'She was entrusted to me by—by one, sir, well known to you,' I answered hoarsely. 'My honour is engaged to him and to her. If I follow on my feet and alone, I must follow. If I cannot save her, I can at least punish the villains who have wronged her.'

'But the man's wife is with them,' he said in some wonder.

'That goes for nothing,' I answered.

He saw the strong emotion under which I laboured, and which scarcely suffered me to answer him with patience; and he looked at me curiously, but not unkindly. 'The sooner you are off, the better then,' he said, nodding. 'I gathered as much. The man Maignan will have his fellows at the south gate an hour before noon, I understand. François has two lackeys, and he is wild to go. With yourself and the lad there you will muster nine swords. I will lend you two. I can spare no more, for we may have an *émeute* at any moment. You will take the road, therefore, eleven in all, and should overtake them some time to-night if your horses are in condition.'

I thanked him warmly, without regarding his kindly statement that my conduct on the previous day had laid him under lasting obligations to me. We went down together, and he transferred two of his fellows to me there and then, bidding them change their horses for fresh ones and meet me at the south gate. He sent also a man to my stable—Simon Fleix having disappeared in the confusion—for the Cid, and was in the act of inquiring whether I needed anything else, when a woman slipped through the knot of horsemen who surrounded us as we stood in the doorway of the house, and, throwing herself upon me, grasped me by the arm. It was Fanchette. Her harsh features were distorted with grief, her cheeks were mottled with the violent weeping in which such persons vent their sorrow. Her hair hung in long wisps on her neck. Her dress was torn and draggled, and there was a great bruise over her eye. She had the air of one frantic with despair and misery.

She caught me by the cloak, and shook me so that I staggered. 'I have found you at last!' she cried joyfully. 'You will take me with you! You will take me to her!'

Though her words tried my composure, and my heart went out to her, I strove to answer her according to the sense of the matter. 'It is impossible,' I said sternly.

'This is a man's errand. We shall have to ride day and night, my good woman.'

'But I will ride day and night too!' she replied passionately, flinging the hair from her eyes, and looking wildly from me to M. de Rambouillet. 'What would I not do for her? I am as strong as a man, and stronger. Take me, take me, I say, and when I meet that villain I will tear him limb from limb!'

I shuddered, listening to her; but remembering that, being country bred, she was really as strong as she said, and that likely enough some advantage might accrue to us from her perfect fidelity and devotion to her mistress, I gave a reluctant consent. I sent one of M. de Rambouillet's men to the stable where the deaf man's bay was standing, bidding him pay whatever was due to the dealer, and bring the horse to the south gate; my intention being to mount one of my men on it, and furnish the woman with a less tricky steed.

The briskness of these and the like preparations, which even for one of my age and in my state of anxiety were not devoid of pleasure, prevented my thoughts dwelling on the future. Content to have M. François' assistance without following up too keenly the train of ideas which his readiness suggested, I was satisfied also to make use of Simon without calling him to instant account for his treachery. The bustle of the streets, which the confirmation of the king's speedy departure had filled with surly, murmuring crowds, tended still further to keep my fears at bay; while the contrast between my present circumstances, as I rode through them well-appointed and well-attended, with the Marquis by my side, and the poor appearance I had exhibited on my first arrival in Blois, could not fail to inspire me with hope that I might surmount this danger also, and in the event find Mademoiselle safe and uninjured. I took leave of M. de Rambouillet with many expressions of esteem on both sides, and a few minutes before eleven reached the rendezvous outside the south gate.

M. d'Agen and Maignan advanced to meet me, the former still presenting an exterior so stern and grave that I wondered to see him, and could scarcely believe he was the same gay spark whose elegant affectations had more than once caused me to smile. He saluted me in silence; Maignan with a sheepish air, which ill-concealed the savage temper defeat had roused in him. Counting my men, I found we mustered ten only, but the equerry explained that he had despatched a rider ahead to make inquiries and leave word for us at convenient points; to the end that we might follow the trail with as few delays as possible. Highly commending Maignan for his forethought in this, I gave the word to start, and crossing the river by the St. Gervais Bridge, we took the road for Selles at a smart trot.

The weather had changed much in the last twenty-four hours. The sun shone brightly, with a warm west wind, and the country already showed signs of the early spring which marked that year. If, the first hurry of departure over, I had now leisure to feel the gnawing of anxiety and the tortures inflicted by an imagination which, far outstripping us, rode with those whom we pursued and shared their perils, I found two sources of comfort still open to me. No man who has seen service can look on a little band of well-appointed horsemen without pleasure. I reviewed the stalwart forms and stern faces which moved beside me, and comparing their decent order and sound equipments with the scurvy foulness of the men who had ridden north with me, thanked God, and ceased to wonder at the indignation which Matthew and his fellows had aroused in mademoiselle's mind. My other source of satisfaction, the regular beat of hoofs and ring of bridles continually augmented. Every step took us farther from Blois—farther from the close town and reeking streets and the Court; which, if it no longer seemed to me a shambles, befouled by one great deed of blood—experience had removed that impression—retained an appearance infinitely mean and miserable in my eyes. I hated and loathed its intrigues

and its jealousies, the folly which trifled in a closet while rebellion mastered France, and the pettiness which recognised no wisdom save that of balancing party and party. I thanked God that my work there was done, and could have welcomed any other occasion that forced me to turn my back on it, and sent me at large over the pure heaths, through the woods, and under the wide heaven, speckled with moving clouds.

But such springs of comfort soon ran dry. M. d'Agen's gloomy rage and the fiery gleam in Maignan's eye would have reminded me, had I been in any danger of forgetting the errand on which we were bound, and the need, exceeding all other needs, which compelled us to lose no moment that might be used. Those whom we followed had five hours' start. The thought of what might happen in those five hours to the two helpless women whom I had sworn to protect burned itself into my mind; so that to refrain from putting spurs to my horse and riding recklessly forward taxed at times all my self-control. The horses seemed to crawl. The men rising and falling listlessly in their saddles maddened me. Though I could not hope to come upon any trace of our quarry for many hours, perhaps for days, I scanned the long, flat heaths unceasingly, searched every marshy bottom before we descended into it, and panted for the moment when the next low ridge should expose to our view a fresh track of wood and waste. The rosy visions of the past night, and those fancies in particular which had made the dawn memorable, recurred to me, as his deeds in the body (so men say) to a hopeless drowning wretch. I grew to think of nothing but Bruhl and revenge. Even the absurd care with which Simon avoided the neighbourhood of Fanchette, riding anywhere so long as he might ride at a distance from the angry woman's tongue and hand—which provoked many a laugh from the men, and came to be the joke of the company—failed to draw a smile from me.

We passed through Contres, four leagues from Blois, an

hour after noon, and three hours later crossed the Cher at Selles, where we stayed awhile to bait our horses. Here we had news of the party before us, and henceforth had little doubt that Bruhl was making for the Limousin; a district in which he might rest secure under the protection of Turenne, and safely defy alike the King of France and the King of Navarre. The greater the necessity, it was plain, for speed; but the roads in that neighbourhood, and forward as far as Valancy, proved heavy and foundrous, and it was all we could do to reach Levroux with jaded horses three hours after sunset. The probability that Bruhl would lie at Châteauroux, five leagues farther on—for I could not conceive that under the circumstances he would spare the women—would have led me to push forward had it been possible; but the darkness and the difficulty of finding a guide who would venture deterred me from the hopeless attempt, and we stayed the night where we were.

Here we first heard of the plague; which was said to be ravaging Châteauroux and all the country farther south. The landlord of the inn would have regaled us with many stories of it, and particularly of the swiftness with which men and even cattle succumbed to its attacks. But we had other things to think of, and between anxiety and weariness had clean forgotten the matter when we rose next morning.

We started shortly after daybreak, and for three leagues pressed on at tolerable speed. Then, for no reason stated, our guide gave us the slip as we passed through a wood, and was seen no more. We lost the road, and had to retrace our steps. We strayed into a slough, and extracted ourselves with difficulty. The man who was riding the bay I had purchased forgot the secret which I had imparted to him, and got an ugly fall. In fine, after all these mishaps it wanted little of noon, and less to exhaust our patience, when at length we came in sight of Châteauroux.

Before entering the town we had still an adventure; for we came at a turn in the road on a scene as surprising as it was at first inexplicable. A little north of the town, in

a coppice of box facing the south and west, we happed suddenly on a rude encampment, consisting of a dozen huts and booths, set back from the road and formed, some of branches of evergreen trees laid clumsily together, and some of sacking stretched over poles. A number of men and women of decent appearance lay on the short grass before the booths, idly sunning themselves; or moved about, cooking and tending fires, while a score of children raced to and fro with noisy shouts and laughter. The appearance of our party on the scene caused an instant panic. The women and children fled screaming into the wood, spreading the sound of breaking branches farther and farther as they retreated; while the men, a miserable pale-faced set, drew together, and seeming half-inclined to fly also, regarded us with glances of fear and suspicion.

Remarking that their appearance and dress were not those of vagrants, while the booths seemed to indicate little skill or experience in the builders, I bade my companions halt, and advanced alone.

'What is the meaning of this, my men?' I said, addressing the first group I reached. 'You seem to have come a-Maying before the time. Whence are you?'

'From Châteauroux,' the foremost answered sullenly. His dress, now I saw him nearer, seemed to be that of a respectable townsman.

'Why?' I replied. 'Have you no homes?'

'Ay, we have homes,' he answered with the same brevity.

'Then why, in God's name, are you here?' I retorted, marking the gloomy air and downcast faces of the group. 'Have you been harried?'

'Ay, harried by the Plague!' he answered bitterly. 'Do you mean to say you have not heard? In Châteauroux there is one man dead in three. Take my advice, sir—you are a brave company—turn, and go home again.'

'Is it as bad as that?' I exclaimed. I had forgotten the landlord's gossip, and the explanation struck me with the force of surprise.

'Ay, is it! Do you see the blue haze?' he continued, pointing with a sudden gesture to the lower ground before us, over which a light pall of summery vapour hung still and motionless. 'Do you see it? Well, under that there is death! You may find food in Châteauroux, and stalls for your horses, and a man to take money; for there are still men there. But cross the Indre, and you will see sights worse than a battle-field a week old! You will find no living soul in house or stable or church, but corpses plenty. The land is cursed! cursed for heresy, some say! Half are dead, and half are fled to the woods! And if you do not die of the plague, you will starve.'

'God forbid!' I muttered, thinking with a shudder of those before us. This led me to ask him if a party resembling ours in number, and including two women, had passed that way. He answered, Yes, after sunset the evening before; that their horses were stumbling with fatigue and the men swearing in pure weariness. He believed that they had not entered the town, but had made a rude encampment half a mile beyond it; and had again broken this up, and ridden southwards two or three hours before our arrival.

'Then we may overtake them to-day?' I said.

'By your leave, sir,' he answered, with grave meaning. 'I think you are more likely to meet them.'

Shrugging my shoulders, I thanked him shortly and left him; the full importance of preventing my men hearing what I had heard—lest the panic which possessed these townspeople should seize on them also—being already in my mind. Nevertheless the thought came too late, for on turning my horse I found one of the foremost, a long, solemn-faced man, had already found his way to Maignan's stirrup; where he was dilating so eloquently upon the enemy which awaited us southwards that the countenances of half the troopers were as long as his own, and I saw nothing for it but to interrupt his oration by a smart application of my switch to his shoulders. Having thus stopped him, and rated him back to his fellows, I gave the

word to march. The men obeyed mechanically, we swung into a canter, and for a moment the danger was over.

But I knew that it would recur again and again. Stealthily marking the faces round me, and listening to the whispered talk which went on, I saw the terror spread from one to another. Voices which earlier in the day had been raised in song and jest grew silent. Great reckless fellows of Maignan's following, who had an oath and a blow for all comers, and to whom the deepest ford seemed to be child's play, rode with drooping heads and knitted brows; or scanned with ill-concealed anxiety the strange haze before us, through which the roofs of the town, and here and there a low hill or line of poplars, rose to plainer view. Maignan himself, the stoutest of the stout, looked grave, and had lost his swaggering air. Only three persons preserved their *sang-froid* entire. Of these, M. d'Agen rode as if he had heard nothing, and Simon Fleix as if he feared nothing; while Fanchette, gazing eagerly forward, saw, it was plain, only one object in the mist, and that was her mistress's face.

We found the gates of the town open, and this, which proved to be the herald of stranger sights, daunted the hearts of my men more than the most hostile reception. As we entered, our horses' hoofs, clattering loudly on the pavement, awoke a hundred echoes in the empty houses to right and left. The main street, flooded with sunshine, which made its desolation seem a hundred times more formidable, stretched away before us, bare and empty; or haunted only by a few slinking dogs, and prowling wretches, who fled, affrighted at the unaccustomed sounds, or stood and eyed us listlessly as we passed. A bell tolled; in the distance we heard the wailing of women. The silent ways, the black cross which marked every second door, the frightful faces which once or twice looked out from upper windows and blasted our sight, infected my men with terror so profound and so ungovernable that at last discipline was forgotten; and one shoving his horse before another in narrow

places, there was a scuffle to be first. One, and then a second, began to trot. The trot grew into a shuffling canter. The gates of the inn lay open, nay seemed to invite us to enter; but no one turned or halted. Moved by a single impulse we pushed breathlessly on and on, until the open country was reached, and we who had entered the streets in silent awe, swept out and over the bridge as if the fiend were at our heels.

That I shared in this flight causes me no shame even now, for my men were at the time ungovernable, as the best-trained troops are when seized by such panics; and, moreover, I could have done no good by remaining in the town, where the strength of the contagion was probably greater and the inn larder like to be as bare as the hillside. Few towns are without a hostelry outside the gates for the convenience of knights of the road or those who would avoid the dues, and Châteauroux proved no exception to this rule. A short half-mile from the walls we drew rein before a second encampment raised about a wayside house. It scarcely needed the sound of music mingled with brawling voices to inform us that the wilder spirits of the town had taken refuge here, and were seeking to drown in riot and debauchery, as I have seen happen in a besieged place, the remembrance of the enemy which stalked abroad in the sunshine. Our sudden appearance, while it put a stop to the mimicry of mirth, brought out a score of men and women in every stage of drunkenness and dishevelment, of whom some, with hiccoughs and loose gestures, cried to us to join them, while others swore horridly at being recalled to the present, which, with the future, they were endeavouring to forget.

I cursed them in return for a pack of craven wretches, and threatening to ride down those who obstructed us, ordered my men forward; halting eventually a quarter of a mile farther on, where a wood of groundling oaks which still wore last year's leaves afforded fair shelter. Afraid to leave my men myself, lest some should stray to the inn

and others desert altogether, I requested M. d'Agen to return thither with Maignan and Simon, and bring us what forage and food we required. This he did with perfect success, though not until after a scuffle, in which Maignan showed himself a match for a hundred. We watered the horses at a neighbouring brook, and assigning two hours to rest and refreshment—a great part of which M. d'Agen and I spent walking up and down in moody silence, each immersed in his own thoughts—we presently took the road again with renewed spirits.

But a panic is not easily shaken off, nor is any fear so difficult to combat and defeat as the fear of the invisible. The terrors which food and drink had for a time thrust out presently returned with sevenfold force. Men looked uneasily in one another's faces, and from them to the haze which veiled all distant objects. They muttered of the heat, which was sudden, strange, and abnormal at that time of the year. And by-and-by they had other things to speak of. We met a man, who ran beside us and begged of us, crying out in a dreadful voice that his wife and four children lay unburied in the house. A little farther on, beside a well, the corpse of a woman with a child at her breast lay poisoning the water; she had crawled to it to appease her thirst, and died of the draught. Last of all, in a beech-wood near Lotier we came upon a lady living in her coach, with one or two panic-stricken women for her only attendants. Her husband was in Paris, she told me; half her servants were dead, the rest had fled. Still she retained in a remarkable degree both courage and courtesy, and accepting with fortitude my reasons and excuses for perforce leaving her in such a plight, gave me a clear account of Bruhl and his party, who had passed her some hours before. The picture of this lady gazing after us with perfect good-breeding, as we rode away at speed, followed by the lamentations of her women, remains with me to this day; filling my mind at once with admiration and melancholy. For, as I learned later, she fell ill of the plague where we

left her in the beech-wood, and died in a night with both her servants.

The intelligence we had from her inspired us to push forward, sparing neither spur nor horseflesh, in the hope that we might overtake Bruhl before night should expose his captives to fresh hardships and dangers. But the pitch to which the dismal sights and sounds I have mentioned, and a hundred like them, had raised the fears of my following did much to balk my endeavours. For a while, indeed, under the influence of momentary excitement, they spurred their horses to the gallop, as if their minds were made up to face the worst; but presently they checked them despite all my efforts, and, lagging slowly and more slowly, seemed to lose all spirit and energy. The desolation which met our eyes on every side, no less than the death-like stillness which prevailed, even the birds, as it seemed to us, being silent, chilled the most reckless to the heart. Maignan's face lost its colour, his voice its ring. As for the rest, starting at a sound and wincing if a leather galled them, they glanced backwards twice for once they looked forwards, and held themselves ready to take to their heels and be gone at the least alarm.

Noting these signs, and doubting if I could trust even Maignan, I thought it prudent to change my place, and falling to the rear, rode there with a grim face and a pistol ready to my hand. It was not the least of my annoyances that M. d'Agen appeared to be ignorant of any cause for apprehension save such as lay before us, and riding on in the same gloomy fit which had possessed him from the moment of starting, neither sought my opinion nor gave his own, but seemed to have undergone so complete and mysterious a change that I could think of one thing only that could have power to effect so marvellous a transformation. I felt his presence a trial rather than a help, and reviewing the course of our short friendship, which a day or two before had been so great a delight to me—as the friendship of a young man commonly is to one growing

old—I puzzled myself with much wondering whether there could be rivalry between us.

Sunset, which was welcome to my company, since it removed the haze, which they regarded with superstitious dread, found us still plodding through a country of low ridges and shallow valleys, both clothed in oak-woods. Its short brightness died away, and with it my last hope of surprising Bruhl before I slept. Darkness fell upon us as we wended our way slowly down a steep hillside where the path was so narrow and difficult as to permit only one to descend at a time. A stream of some size, if we might judge from the noise it made, poured through the ravine below us, and presently, at the point where we believed the crossing to be, we espied a solitary light shining in the blackness. To proceed farther was impossible, for the ground grew more and more precipitous; and, seeing this, I bade Maignan dismount, and leaving us where we were, go for a guide to the house from which the light issued.

He obeyed, and plunging into the night, which in that pit between the hills was of an inky darkness, presently returned with a peasant and a lanthorn. I was about to bid the man guide us to the ford, or to some level ground where we could picket the horses, when Maignan gleefully cried out that he had news. I asked what news.

'Speak up, *manant!*' he said, holding up his lanthorn so that the light fell on the man's haggard face and unkempt hair. 'Tell his Excellency what you have told me, or I will skin you alive, little man!'

'Your other party came to the ford an hour before sunset,' the peasant answered, staring dully at us. 'I saw them coming, and hid myself. They quarrelled by the ford. Some were for crossing, and some not.'

'They had ladies with them?' M. d'Agen said suddenly.

'Ay, two, your Excellency,' the clown answered, 'riding like men. In the end they did not cross for fear of the plague, but turned up the river, and rode westwards towards St. Gaultier.'

'St. Gaultier!' I said. 'Where is that? Where does the road to it go to besides?'

But the peasant's knowledge was confined to his own neighbourhood. He knew no world beyond St. Gaultier, and could not answer my question. I was about to bid him show us the way down, when Maignan cried out that he knew more.

'What?' I asked.

'Arnidieu! he heard them say where they were going to spend the night!'

'Ha!' I cried. 'Where?'

'In an old ruined castle two leagues from this, and between here and St. Gaultier,' the equerry answered, forgetting in his triumph both plague and panic. 'What do you say to that, your Excellency?' It is so, sirrah, is it not?' he continued, turning to the peasant. 'Speak, Master Jacques, or I will roast you before a slow fire!'

But I did not wait to hear the answer. Leaping to the ground, I took the Cid's rein on my arm, and cried impatiently to the man to lead us down.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE CASTLE ON THE HILL.

The certainty that Bruhl and his captives were not far off, and the likelihood that we might be engaged within the hour, expelled from the minds of even the most timorous among us the vapourish fears which had before haunted them. In the hurried scramble which presently landed us on the bank of the stream, men who had ridden for hours in sulky silence found their voices, and from cursing their horses' blunders soon advanced to swearing and singing after the fashion of their kind. This change, by relieving me of a great fear, left me at leisure to consider our posi-

tion, and estimate more clearly than I might have done the advantages of hastening, or postponing, an attack. We numbered eleven; the enemy, to the best of my belief, twelve. Of this slight superiority I should have recked little in the daytime; nor, perhaps, counting Maignan as two, have allowed that it existed. But the result of a night attack is more difficult to forecast; and I had also to take into account the perils to which the two ladies would be exposed, between the darkness and tumult, in the event of the issue remaining for a time in doubt.

These considerations, and particularly the last, weighed so powerfully with me, that before I reached the bottom of the gorge I had decided to postpone the attack until morning. The answers to some questions which I put to the inhabitant of the house by the ford as soon as I reached level ground only confirmed me in this resolution. The road Bruhl had taken ran for a distance by the river-side, and along the bottom of the gorge; and, difficult by day, was reported to be impracticable for horses by night. The castle he had mentioned lay full two leagues away, and on the farther edge of a tract of rough woodland. Finally, I doubted whether, in the absence of any other reason for delay, I could have marched my men, weary as they were, to the place before daybreak.

When I came to announce this decision, however, and to inquire what accommodation the peasant could afford us, I found myself in trouble. Fanchette, mademoiselle's woman, suddenly confronted me, her face scarlet with rage. Thrusting herself forward into the circle of light cast by the lanthorn, she assailed me with a virulence and fierceness which said more for her devotion to her mistress than her respect for me. Her wild gesticulations, her threats, and the appeals which she made now to me, and now to the men who stood in a circle round us, their faces in shadow, discomfited as much as they surprised me.

'What!' she cried violently, 'you call yourself a gentleman, and lie here and let my mistress be murdered, or

worse, within a league of you! Two leagues? A groat for your two leagues! I would walk them barefoot if that would shame you. And you, you call yourselves men, and suffer it! It is God's truth you are a set of cravens and sluggards. Give me as many women, and I would——'

'Peace, woman!' Maignan said in his deep voice. 'You had your way and came with us, and you will obey orders as well as another! Be off, and see to the victuals before worse happen to you!'

'Ay, see to the victuals!' she retorted. 'See to the victuals, forsooth! That is all you think of—to lie warm and eat your fill! A set of dastardly, drinking, droning guzzlers you are! You are!' she retorted, her voice rising to a shriek. 'May the plague take you!'

'Silence!' Maignan growled fiercely, 'or have a care to yourself! For a copper-piece I would send you to cool your heels in the water below—for that last word! Begone, do you hear,' he continued, seizing her by the shoulder and thrusting her towards the house, 'or worse may happen to you. We are rough customers, as you will find if you do not lock up your tongue!'

I heard her go wailing into the darkness; and Heaven knows it was not without compunction I forced myself to remain inactive in the face of a devotion which seemed so much greater than mine. The men fell away one by one to look to their horses and choose sleeping-quarters for the night; and presently M. d'Agen and I were left alone standing beside the lanthorn, which the man had hung on a bush before his door. The brawling of the water as it poured between the banks, a score of paces from us, and the black darkness which hid everything beyond the little ring of light in which we stood—so that for all we could see we were in a pit—had the air of isolating us from all the world.

I looked at the young man, who had not once lisped that day; and I plainly read in his attitude his disapproval of my caution. Though he declined to meet my eye, he stood

with his arms folded and his head thrown back, making no attempt to disguise the scorn and ill-temper which his face expressed. Hurt by the woman's taunts, and possibly shaken in my opinion, I grew restive under his silence, and unwisely gave way to my feelings.

'You do not appear to approve of my decision, M. d'Agen?' I said.

'It is yours to command, sir,' he answered proudly.

There are truisms which have more power to annoy than the veriest reproaches. I should have borne in mind the suspense and anxiety he was suffering, and which had so changed him that I scarcely knew him for the gay young spark on whose toe I had trodden. I should have remembered that he was young and I old, and that it behoved me to be patient. But on my side also there was anxiety, and responsibility as well; and, above all, a rankling soreness, to which I refrain from giving the name of jealousy, though it came as near to that feeling as the difference in our ages and personal advantages (whereof the balance was all on his side) would permit. This, no doubt, it was which impelled me to continue the argument.

'You would go on?' I said persistently.

'It is idle to say what I would do,' he answered with a flash of anger.

'I asked for your opinion, sir,' I rejoined stiffly.

'To what purpose?' he retorted, stroking his small moustache haughtily. 'We look at the thing from opposite points. You are going about your business, which appears to be the rescuing of ladies who are—may I venture to say it?—so unfortunate as to entrust themselves to your charge. I, M. de Marsac, am more deeply interested. More deeply interested,' he repeated lamely. 'I—in a word, I am prepared, sir, to do what others only talk of—and if I cannot follow otherwise, would follow on my feet!'

'Whom?' I asked curtly, stung by this repetition of my own words.

He laughed harshly and bitterly. 'Why explain? or

why quarrel?' he replied cynically. 'God knows, if I could afford to quarrel with you, I should have done so fifty hours ago. But I need your help; and, needing it, I am prepared to do that which must seem to a person of your calm passions and perfect judgment alike futile and incredible—pay the full price for it.'

'The full price for it!' I muttered, understanding nothing, except that I did not understand.

'Ay, the full price for it!' he repeated. And as he spoke he looked at me with an expression of rage so fierce that I recoiled a step. That seemed to restore him in some degree to himself, for without giving me an opportunity of answering he turned hastily from me, and, striding away, was in a moment lost in the darkness.

He left me amazed beyond measure. I stood repeating his phrase about 'the full price' a hundred times over, but still found it and his passion inexplicable. To cut the matter short, I could come to no other conclusion than that he desired to insult me, and aware of my poverty and the equivocal position in which I stood towards mademoiselle, chose his words accordingly. This seemed a thing unworthy of one of whom I had before thought highly; but calmer reflection enabling me to see something of youthful bombast in the tirade he had delivered, I smiled a little sadly, and determined to think no more of the matter for the present, but to persist firmly in that which seemed to me to be the right course.

Having settled this, I was about to enter the house, when Maignan stopped me, telling me that the plague had killed five people in it, leaving only the man we had seen, who had, indeed, been seized, but recovered. This ghastly news had scared my company to such a degree that they had gone as far from the house as the level ground permitted, and there lighted a fire, round which they were going to pass the night. Fanchette had taken up her quarters in the stable, and the equerry announced that he had kept a shed full of sweet hay for M. d'Agen and myself.

I assented to this arrangement, and after supping off soup and black bread, which was all we could procure, bade the peasant rouse us two hours before sunrise; and so, being too weary and old in service to remain awake thinking, I fell asleep, and slept soundly till a little after four.

My first business on rising was to see that the men before mounting made a meal, for it is ill work fighting empty. I went round also and saw that all had their arms, and that such as carried pistols had them loaded and primed. M. François did not put in an appearance until this work was done, and then showed a very pale and gloomy countenance. I took no heed of him, however, and with the first streak of daylight we started in single file and at a snail's pace up the valley, the peasant, whom I placed in Maignan's charge, going before to guide us, and M. d'Agen and I riding in the rear. By the time the sun rose and warmed our chilled and shivering frames we were over the worst of the ground, and were able to advance at some speed along a track cut through a dense forest of oak-trees.

Though we had now risen out of the valley, the close-set trunks and the undergrowth round them prevented our seeing in any direction. For a mile or more we rode on blindly, and presently started on finding ourselves on the brow of a hill, looking down into a valley, the nearer end of which was clothed in woods, while the farther widened into green sloping pastures. From the midst of these a hill or mount rose sharply up, until it ended in walls of grey stone scarce to be distinguished at that distance from the native rock on which they stood.

'See!' cried our guide. 'There is the castle!'

Bidding the men dismount in haste, that the chance of our being seen by the enemy—which was not great—might be farther lessened, I began to inspect the position at leisure; my first feeling while doing so being one of thankfulness that I had not attempted a night attack, which must inevitably have miscarried, possibly with loss to ourselves, and certainly with the result of informing the enemy of our

presence. The castle, of which we had a tolerable view, was long and narrow in shape, consisting of two towers connected by walls. The nearer tower, through which lay the entrance, was roofless, and in every way seemed to be more ruinous than the inner one, which appeared to be perfect in both its stories. This defect notwithstanding, the place was so strong that my heart sank lower the longer I looked; and a glance at Maignan's face assured me that his experience was also at fault. For M. d'Agen, I clearly saw, when I turned to him, that he had never until this moment realised what we had to expect, but, regarding our pursuit in the light of a hunting-party, had looked to see it end in like easy fashion. His blank, surprised face, as he stood eyeing the stout grey walls, said as much as this.

'Arnidieu!' Maignan muttered, 'give me ten men, and I would hold it against a hundred!'

'Tut, man, there is more than one way to Rome!' I answered oracularly, though I was far from feeling as confident as I seemed. 'Come, let us descend and view this nut a little nearer.'

We began to trail downwards in silence, and as the path led us for a while out of sight of the castle, we were able to proceed with less caution. We had nearly reached without adventure the farther skirts of the wood, between which and the ruin lay an interval of open ground, when we came suddenly, at the edge of a little clearing, on an old hag; who was so intent upon tying up faggots that she did not see us until Maignan's hand was on her shoulder. When she did, she screamed out, and escaping from him with an activity wonderful in a woman of her age, ran with great swiftness to the side of an old man who lay at the foot of a tree half a bowshot off; and whom we had not before seen. Snatching up an axe, she put herself in a posture of defence before him with gestures and in a manner as touching in the eyes of some among us as they were ludicrous in those of others; who cried to Maignan that he had met his match at last, with other gibes of the kind that pass current in camps.

I called to him to let her be, and went forward myself to the old man, who lay on a rude bed of leaves, and seemed unable to rise. Appealing to me with a face of agony not to hurt his wife, he bade her again and again lay down her axe; but she would not do this until I had assured her that we meant him no harm, and that my men should molest neither the one nor the other.

'We only want to know this,' I said, speaking slowly, in fear lest my language should be little more intelligible to them than their *patois* to me. 'There are a dozen horsemen in the old castle there, are there not?'

The man stilled his wife, who continued to chatter and mow at us, and answered eagerly that there were; adding, with a trembling oath, that the robbers had beaten him, robbed him of his small store of meal, and when he would have protested, thrown him out, breaking his leg.

'Then how came you here?' I said.

'She brought me on her back,' he answered feebly.

Doubtless there were men in my train who would have done all that these others had done; but hearing the simple story told, they stamped and swore great oaths of indignanation; and one, the roughest of the party, took out some black bread and gave it to the woman, whom under other circumstances he would not have hesitated to rob. Maignan, who knew all arts appertaining to war, examined the man's leg and made a kind of cradle for it, while I questioned the woman.

'They are there still?' I said. 'I saw their horses tethered under the walls.'

'Yes, God requite them!' she answered, trembling violently.

'Tell me about the castle, my good woman,' I said. 'How many roads into it are there?'

'Only one.'

'Through the nearer tower?'

She said yes, and finding that she understood me, and was less dull of intellect than her wretched appearance led

me to expect. I put a series of questions to her which it would be tedious to detail. Suffice it that I learned that it was impossible to enter or leave the ruin except through the nearer tower; that a rickety temporary gate barred the entrance, and that from this tower, which was a mere shell of four walls, a narrow square-headed doorway without a door led into the court, beyond which rose the habitable tower of two stories.

'Do you know if they intend to stay there?' I asked.

'Oh, ay, they bade me bring them faggots for their fire this morning, and I should have a handful of my own meal back,' she answered bitterly; and fell thereon into a passion of impotent rage, shaking both her clenched hands in the direction of the castle, and screaming frenzied maledictions in her cracked and quavering voice.

I pondered awhile over what she had said; liking very little the thought of that narrow square-headed doorway through which we must pass before we could effect anything. And the gate, too, troubled me. It might not be a strong one, but we had neither powder, nor guns, nor any siege implements, and could not pull down stone walls with our naked hands. By seizing the horses we could indeed cut off Bruhl's retreat; but he might still escape in the night; and in any case our pains would only increase the women's hardships while adding fuel to his rage. We must have some other plan.

The sun was high by this time; the edge of the wood scarcely a hundred paces from us. By advancing a few yards through the trees I could see the horses feeding peacefully at the foot of the sunny slope, and even follow with my eyes the faint track which zigzagged up the hill to the closed gate. No one appeared—doubtless they were sleeping off the fatigue of the journey—and I drew no inspiration thence; but as I turned to consult Maignan my eye lit on the faggots, and I saw in a flash that here was a chance of putting into practice a stratagem as old as the hills, yet ever fresh, and not seldom successful.

It was no time for over-refinement. My knaves were beginning to stray forward out of curiosity, and at any moment one of our horses, scenting those of the enemy, might neigh and give the alarm. Hastily calling M. d'Agen and Maignan to me, I laid my plan before them, and satisfied myself that it had their approval; the fact that I had reserved a special part for the former serving to thaw the reserve which had succeeded to his outbreak of the night before. After some debate Maignan persuaded me that the old woman had not sufficient nerve to play the part I proposed for her, and named Fanchette; who being called into council, did not belie the opinion we had formed of her courage. In a few moments our preparations were complete: I had donned the old charcoal-burner's outer rags, Fanchette had assumed those of the woman, while M. d'Agen, who was for a time at a loss, and betrayed less taste for this part of the plan than for any other, ended by putting on the jerkin and hose of the man who had served us as guide.

When all was ready I commended the troop to Maignan's discretion, charging him in the event of anything happening to us to continue the most persistent efforts for mademoiselle's release, and on no account to abandon her. Having received his promise to this effect, and being satisfied that he would keep it, we took up each of us a great faggot, which being borne on the head and shoulders served to hide the features very effectually; and thus disguised we boldly left the shelter of the trees. Fanchette and I went first, tottering in a most natural fashion under the weight of our burdens, while M. d'Agen followed a hundred yards behind. I had given Maignan orders to make a dash for the gate the moment he saw the last named start to run.

The perfect stillness of the valley, the clearness of the air, and the absence of any sign of life in the castle before us—which might have been that of the Sleeping Princess, so fairy-like it looked against the sky—with the suspense and excitement in our own breasts, which these peculiarities

seemed to increase a hundred-fold, made the time that followed one of the strangest in my experience. It was nearly ten o'clock, and the warm sunshine flooding everything about us rendered the ascent, laden as we were, laborious in the extreme. The crisp, short turf, which had scarcely got its spring growth, was slippery and treacherous. We dared not hasten, for we knew not what eyes were upon us, and we dared as little—after we had gone half-way—lay our faggots down, lest the action should disclose too much of our features.

When we had reached a point within a hundred paces of the gate, which still remained obstinately closed, we stood to breathe ourselves, and balancing my bundle on my head, I turned to make sure that all was right behind us. I found that M. d'Agen, intent on keeping his distance, had chosen the same moment for rest, and was sitting in a very natural manner on his faggot, mopping his face with the sleeve of his jerkin. I scanned the brown leafless wood, in which we had left Maignan and our men; but I could detect no glitter among the trees nor any appearance likely to betray us. Satisfied on these points, I muttered a few words of encouragement to Fanchette, whose face was streaming with perspiration; and together we turned and addressed ourselves to our task, fatigue—for we had had no practice in carrying burdens on the head—enabling us to counterfeit the decrepitude of age almost to the life.

The same silence prevailing as we drew nearer inspired me with not a few doubts and misgivings. Even the bleat of a sheep would have been welcome in the midst of a stillness which seemed ominous. But no sheep bleated, no voice hailed us. The gate, ill-hung and full of fissures, remained closed. Step by step we staggered up to it, and at length reached it. Afraid to speak lest my accent should betray me, I struck the forepart of my faggot against it and waited: doubting whether our whole stratagem had not been perceived from the beginning, and a pistol-shot might not be the retort.

Nothing of the kind happened, however. The sound of the blow, which echoed dully through the building, died away, and the old silence resumed its sway. We knocked again, but fully two minutes elapsed before a grumbling voice, as of a man aroused from sleep, was heard drawing near, and footsteps came slowly and heavily to the gate. Probably the fellow inspected us through a loophole, for he paused a moment, and my heart sank; but the next, seeing nothing suspicious, he unbarred the gate with a querulous oath, and, pushing it open, bade us enter and be quick about it.

I stumbled forward into the cool, dark shadow, and the woman followed me, while the man, stepping out with a yawn, stood in the entrance, stretching himself in the sunshine. The roofless tower, which smelled dank and unwholesome, was empty, or cumbered only with rubbish and heaps of stones; but looking through the inner door I saw in the courtyard a smouldering fire and half a dozen men in the act of rousing themselves from sleep. I stood a second balancing my faggot, as if in doubt where to lay it down; and then assuring myself by a swift glance that the man who had let us in still had his back towards us, I dropped it across the inner doorway. Fanchette, as she had been instructed, plumped hers upon it, and at the same moment I sprang to the door, and taking the man there by surprise, dealt him a violent blow between the shoulders, which sent him headlong down the slope.

A cry behind me, followed by an oath of alarm, told me that the action was observed and that now was the pinch. In a second I was back at the faggots, and drawing a pistol from under my blouse was in time to meet the rush of the nearest man, who, comprehending all, sprang up, and made for me, with his sheathed sword. I shot him in the chest as he cleared the faggots—which, standing nearly as high as a man's waist, formed a tolerable obstacle—and he pitched forward at my feet.

This balked his companions, who drew back; but unfor-

tunately it was necessary for me to stoop to get my sword, which was hidden in the faggot I had carried. The foremost of the rascals took advantage of this. Rushing at me with a long knife, he failed to stab me—for I caught his wrist—but he succeeded in bringing me to the ground. I thought I was undone. I looked to have the others swarm over upon us; and so it would doubtless have happened had not Fanchette, with rare courage, dealt the first who followed a lusty blow on the body with a great stick she snatched up. The man collapsed on the faggots, and this hampered the rest. The check was enough. It enabled M. d'Agen to come up, who, dashing in through the gate, shot down the first he saw before him, and running at the doorway with his sword with incredible fury and the courage which I had always known him to possess, cleared it in a twinkling. The man with whom I was engaged on the ground, seeing what had happened, wrested himself free with the strength of despair, and dashing through the outer door, narrowly escaped being ridden down by my followers as they swept up to the gate at a gallop, and dismounted amid a whirlwind of cries.

In a moment they thronged in on us pell-mell, and as soon as I could lay my hand on my sword I led them through the doorway with a cheer, hoping to be able to enter the farther tower with the enemy. But the latter had taken the alarm too early and too thoroughly. The court was empty. We were barely in time to see the last man dart up a flight of outside stairs, which led to the first story, and disappear, closing a heavy door behind him. I rushed to the foot of the steps and would have ascended also, hoping against hope to find the door unsecured; but a shot which was fired through a loop hole and narrowly missed my head, and another which brought down one of my men, made me pause. Discerning all the advantage to be on Bruhl's side, since he could shoot us down from his cover, I cried a retreat; the issue of the matter leaving us masters of the entrance-tower, while they retained the inner

and stronger tower, the narrow court between the two being neutral ground unsafe for either party.

Two of their men had fled outwards and were gone, and two lay dead; while the loss on our side was confined to the man who was shot, and Fanchette, who had received a blow on the head in the *mêlée*, and was found, when we retreated, lying sick and dazed against the wall.

It surprised me much, when I came to think upon it, that I had seen nothing of Bruhl, though the skirmish had lasted two or three minutes from the first outcry, and been attended by an abundance of noise. Of Fresnoy, too, I now remembered that I had caught a glimpse only. These two facts seemed so strange that I was beginning to augur the worst, though I scarcely know why, when my spirits were marvellously raised and my fears relieved by a thing which Maignan, who was the first to notice it, pointed out to me. This was the appearance at an upper window of a white 'kerchief, which was waved several times towards us. The window was little more than an arrow-slit, and so narrow and high besides that it was impossible to see who gave the signal; but my experience of mademoiselle's coolness and resource left me in no doubt on the point. With high hopes and a lighter heart than I had worn for some time I bestirred myself to take every precaution, and began by bidding Maignan select two men and ride round the hill, to make sure that the enemy had no way of retreat open to him.

CHAPTER XXIX.

PESTILENCE AND FAMINE.

While Maignan was away about this business I despatched two men to catch our horses, which were running loose in the valley, and to remove those of Bruhl's party to a safe distance from the castle. I also blocked up the

lower part of the door leading into the courtyard, and named four men to remain under arms beside it, that we might not be taken by surprise; an event of which I had the less fear, however, since the enemy were now reduced to eight swords, and could only escape, as we could only enter, through this doorway. I was still busied with these arrangements when M. d'Agen joined me, and I broke off to compliment him on his courage, acknowledging in particular the service he had done me personally. The heat of the conflict had melted the young man's reserve, and flushed his face with pride; but as he listened to me he gradually froze again, and when I ended he regarded me with the same cold hostility.

'I am obliged to you,' he said, bowing. 'But may I ask what next, M. de Marsac?'

'We have no choice,' I answered. 'We can only starve them out.'

'But the ladies?' he said, starting slightly. 'What of them?'

'They will suffer less than the men,' I replied. 'Trust me, the latter will not bear starving long.'

He seemed surprised, but I explained that with our small numbers we could not hope to storm the tower, and might think ourselves fortunate that we now had the enemy cooped up where he could not escape, and must eventually surrender.

'Ay, but in the meantime how will you ensure the women against violence?' he asked, with an air which showed he was far from satisfied.

'I will see to that when Maignan comes back,' I answered pretty confidently.

The equerry appeared in a moment with the assurance that egress from the farther side of the tower was impossible. I bade him nevertheless keep a horseman moving round the hill, that we might have intelligence of any attempt. The order was scarcely given when a man—one of those I had left on guard at the door of the courtyard—

came to tell me that Fresnoy desired to speak with me on behalf of M. de Bruhl.

'Where is he?' I asked.

'At the inner door with a flag of truce,' was the answer.

'Tell him, then,' I said, without offering to move, 'that I will communicate with no one except his leader, M. de Bruhl. And add this, my friend,' I continued. 'Say it aloud: that if the ladies whom he has in charge are injured by so much as a hair, I will hang every man within these walls, from M. de Bruhl to the youngest lackey.' And I added a solemn oath to that effect.

The man nodded, and went on his errand, while I and M. d'Agen, with Maignan, remained standing outside the gate, looking idly over the valley and the brown woods through which we had ridden in the early morning. My eyes rested chiefly on the latter, Maignan's as it proved on the former. Doubtless we all had our own thoughts. Certainly I had, and for a while, in my satisfaction at the result of the attack and the manner in which we had Bruhl confined, I did not remark the gravity which was gradually overspreading the equerry's countenance. When I did I took the alarm, and asked him sharply what was the matter.

'I don't like that, your Excellency,' he answered, pointing into the valley.

I looked anxiously, and looked, and saw nothing.

'What?' I said in astonishment.

'The blue mist,' he muttered, with a shiver. 'I have been watching it this half-hour, your Excellency. It is rising fast.'

I cried out on him for a maudlin fool, and M. d'Agen swore impatiently; but for all that, and despite the contempt I strove to exhibit, I felt a sudden chill at my heart as I recognised in the valley below the same blue haze which had attended us through yesterday's ride, and left us only at nightfall. Involuntarily we both fell to watching it as it rose slowly and more slowly, first enveloping the lower woods, and then spreading itself abroad in the sun-

shine. It is hard to witness a bold man's terror and remain unaffected by it; and I confess I trembled. Here, in the moment of our seeming success, was something which I had not taken into account, something against which I could not guard either myself or others!

'See!' Maignan whispered hoarsely, pointing again with his finger. 'It is the Angel of Death, your Excellency! Where he kills by ones and twos, he is invisible. But when he slays by hundreds and by thousands, men see the shadow of his wings!'

'Chut, fool!' I retorted with anger, which was secretly proportioned to the impression his weird saying made on me. 'You have been in battles! Did you ever see him there? or at a sack? A truce to this folly,' I continued. 'And do you go and inquire what food we have with us. It may be necessary to send for some.'

I watched him go doggedly off, and knowing the stout nature of the man and his devotion to his master, I had no fear that he would fail us; but there were others, almost as necessary to us, in whom I could not place the same confidence. And these had also taken the alarm. When I turned I found groups of pale-faced men, standing by twos and threes at my back; who, pointing and muttering and telling one another what Maignan had told us, looked where we had looked. As one spoke and another listened, I saw the old panic revive in their eyes. Men who an hour or two before had crossed the court under fire with the utmost resolution, and dared instant death without a thought, grew pale, and looking from this side of the valley to that with faltering eyes, seemed to be seeking, like hunted animals, a place of refuge. Fear, once aroused, hung in the air. Men talked in whispers of the abnormal heat, and, gazing at the cloudless sky, fled from the sunshine to the shadow; or, looking over the expanse of woods, longed to be under cover and away from this lofty eyrie, which to their morbid eyes seemed a target for all the shafts of death.

I was not slow to perceive the peril with which these

fears and apprehensions, which rapidly became general, threatened my plans. I strove to keep the men employed, and to occupy their thoughts as far as possible with the enemy and his proceedings; but I soon found that even here a danger lurked; for Maignan, coming to me by-and-by with a grave face, told me that one of Bruhl's men had ventured out, and was parleying with the guard on our side of the court. I went at once and broke the matter off, threatening to shoot the fellow if he was not under cover before I counted ten. But the scared, sulky faces he left behind him told me that the mischief was done, and I could think of no better remedy for it than to give M. d'Agen a hint, and station him at the outer gate with his pistols ready.

The question of provisions, too, threatened to become a serious one; I dared not leave to procure them myself, nor could I trust any of my men with the mission. In fact the besiegers were rapidly becoming the besieged. Intent on the rising haze and their own terrors, they forgot all else. Vigilance and caution were thrown to the winds. The stillness of the valley, its isolation, the distant woods that encircled us and hung quivering in the heated air, all added to the panic. Despite all my efforts and threats, the men gradually left their posts, and getting together in little parties at the gate, worked themselves up to such a pitch of dread that by two hours after noon they were fit for any folly; and at the mere cry of 'plague!' would have rushed to their horses and ridden in every direction.

It was plain that I could depend for useful service on myself and three others only—of whom, to his credit be it said, Simon Fleix was one. Seeing this, I was immensely relieved when I presently heard that Fresnoy was again seeking to speak with me. I was no longer, it will be believed, for standing on formalities; but glad to waive in silence the punctilio on which I had before insisted, and anxious to afford him no opportunity of marking the slackness which prevailed among my men, I hastened to meet

him at the door of the courtyard, where Maignan had detained him.

I might have spared my pains, however. I had no more than saluted him and exchanged the merest preliminaries before I saw that he was in a state of panic far exceeding that of my following. His coarse face, which had never been prepossessing, was mottled and bedabbled with sweat; his bloodshot eyes, when they met mine, wore the fierce yet terrified expression of an animal caught in a trap. Though his first word was an oath, sworn for the purpose of raising his courage, the bully's bluster was gone. He spoke in a low voice, and his hands shook; and for a penny-piece I saw he would have bolted past me and taken his chance in open flight.

I judged from his first words, uttered, as I have said, with an oath, that he was aware of his state. 'M. de Marsac,' he said, whining like a cur, 'you know me to be a man of courage.'

I needed nothing after this to assure me that he meditated something of the basest; and I took care how I answered him. 'I have known you stiff enough upon occasions,' I replied drily. 'And then, again, I have known you not so stiff, M. Fresnoy.'

'Only when you were in question,' he muttered with another oath. 'But flesh and blood cannot stand this. You could not yourself. Between him and them I am fairly worn out. Give me good terms—good terms, you understand, M. de Marsac?' he whispered eagerly, sinking his voice still lower, 'and you shall have all you want.'

'Your lives, and liberty to go where you please,' I answered coldly. 'The two ladies to be first given up to me uninjured. Those are the terms.'

'But for me?' he said anxiously.

'For you? The same as the others,' I retorted. 'Or I will make a distinction for old acquaintance sake, M. Fresnoy; and if the ladies have aught to complain of, I will hang you first.'

He tried to bluster and hold out for a sum of money, or at least for his horse to be given up to him. But I had made up my mind to reward my followers with a present of a horse apiece; and I was besides well aware that this was only an afterthought on his part, and that he had fully decided to yield. I stood fast, therefore. The result justified my firmness, for he presently agreed to surrender on those terms.

'Ay, but M. de Bruhl?' I said, desiring to learn clearly whether he had authority to treat for all. 'What of him?'

He looked at me impatiently. 'Come and see!' he said, with an ugly sneer.

'No, no, my friend,' I answered, shaking my head warily. 'That is not according to rule. You are the surrendering party, and it is for you to trust us. Bring out the ladies, that I may have speech with them, and then I will draw off my men.'

'Nom de Dieu!' he cried hoarsely, with so much fear and rage in his face that I recoiled from him. 'That is just what I cannot do.'

'You cannot?' I rejoined with a sudden thrill of horror. 'Why not? why not, man?' And in the excitement of the moment, conceiving the idea that the worst had happened to the women, I pushed him back with so much fury that he laid his hand on his sword.

'Confound you!' he stuttered, 'stand back! It is not that, I tell you! Mademoiselle is safe and sound, and madame, if she had her senses, would be sound too. It is not our fault if she is not. But I have not got the key of the rooms. It is in Bruhl's pocket, I tell you!'

'Oh!' I made answer drily. 'And Bruhl?'

'Hush, man,' Fresnoy replied, wiping the perspiration from his brow, and bringing his pallid, ugly face, near to mine, 'he has got the plague!'

I stared at him for a moment in silence; which he was the first to break. 'Hush!' he muttered again, laying a trembling hand on my arm, 'if the men knew it—and not

seeing him they are beginning to suspect it—they would rise on us. The devil himself could not keep them here. Between him and them I am on a razor's edge. Madame is with him, and the door is locked. Mademoiselle is in a room upstairs, and the door is locked. And he has the keys. What can I do? What can I do, man?' he cried, his voice hoarse with terror and dismay.

'Get the keys,' I said instinctively.

'What? From him?' he muttered, with an irrepressible shudder, which shook his bloated cheeks. 'God forbid I should see him! It takes stout men infallibly. I should be dead by night! By God, I should!' he continued, whining. 'Now you are not stout, M. de Marsac. If you will come with me I will draw off the men from that part; and you may go in and get the key from him.'

His terror, which surpassed all feigning, and satisfied me without doubt that he was in earnest, was so intense that it could not fail to infect me. I felt my face, as I looked into his, grow to the same hue. I trembled as he did and grew sick. For if there is a word which blanches the soldier's cheek and tries his heart more than another, it is the name of the disease which travels in the hot noonday, and, tainting the strongest as he rides in his pride, leaves him in a few hours a poor mass of corruption. The stoutest and the most reckless fear it; nor could I, more than another, boast myself indifferent to it, or think of its presence without shrinking. But the respect in which a man of birth holds himself saves him from the unreasoning fear which masters the vulgar; and in a moment I recovered myself, and made up my mind what it behoved me to do.

'Wait awhile,' I said sternly, 'and I will come with you.'

He waited accordingly, though with manifest impatience, while I sent for M. d'Agen, and communicated to him what I was about to do. I did not think it necessary to enter into details, or to mention Bruhl's state, for some of the men were well in hearing. I observed that the young gentleman received my directions with a gloomy and dissatis-

ied air. But I had become by this time so used to his moods, and found myself so much mistaken in his character, that I scarcely gave the matter a second thought. I crossed the court with Fresnoy, and in a moment had mounted the outside staircase and passed through the heavy doorway.

The moment I entered, I was forced to do Fresnoy the justice of admitting that he had not come to me before he was obliged. The three men who were on guard inside tossed down their weapons at sight of me, while a fourth, who was posted at a neighbouring window, hailed me with a cry of relief. From the moment I crossed the threshold the defence was practically at an end. I might, had I chosen or found it consistent with honour, have called in my following and secured the entrance. Without pausing, however, I passed on to the foot of a gloomy stone staircase winding up between walls of rough masonry; and here Fresnoy stood on one side and stopped. He pointed upwards with a pale face and muttered, 'The door on the left.'

Leaving him there watching me as I went upwards, I mounted slowly to the landing, and by the light of an arrow-slit which dimly lit the ruinous place found the door he had described, and tried it with my hand. It was locked, but I heard someone moan in the room, and a step crossed the floor, as if he or another came to the door and listened. I knocked, hearing my heart beat in the silence.

At last a voice quite strange to me cried, 'Who is it?'

'A friend,' I muttered, striving to dull my voice that they might not hear me below.

'A friend!' the bitter answer came. 'Go! You have made a mistake! We have no friends.'

'It is I, M. de Marsac,' I rejoined, knocking more imperatively. 'I would see M. de Bruhl. I must see him.'

The person inside, at whose identity I could now make a guess, uttered a low exclamation, and still seemed to hesitate. But on my repeating my demand I heard a rusty bolt withdrawn, and Madame de Bruhl, opening the door a few

inches, showed her face in the gap. 'What do you want?' she murmured jealously.

Prepared as I was to see her, I was shocked by the change in her appearance, a change which even that imperfect light failed to hide. Her blue eyes had grown larger and harder, and there were dark marks under them. Her face, once so brilliant, was grey and pinched; her hair had lost its golden lustre. 'What do you want?' she repeated, eyeing me fiercely.

'To see him,' I answered.

'You know?' she muttered. 'You know that he——'

I nodded.

'And you still want to come in? My God! Swear you will not hurt him?'

'Heaven forbid!' I said; and on that she held the door open that I might enter. But I was not half-way across the room before she had passed me, and was again between me and the wretched makeshift pallet. Nay, when I stood and looked down at him, as he moaned and rolled in senseless agony, with livid face and distorted features (which the cold grey light of that miserable room rendered doubly appalling), she hung over him and fenced him from me: so that looking on him and her, and remembering how he had treated her, and why he came to be in this place, I felt unmanly tears rise to my eyes. The room was still a prison, a prison with broken mortar covering the floor and loopholes for windows; but the captive was held by other chains than those of force. When she might have gone free, her woman's love surviving all that he had done to kill it, chained her to his side with fetters which old wrongs and present danger were powerless to break.

It was impossible that I could view a scene so strange without feelings of admiration as well as pity; or without forgetting for a while, in my respect for Madame de Bruhl's devotion, the risk which had seemed so great to me on the stairs. I had come simply for a purpose of my own, and with no thought of aiding him who lay here. But so great,

as I have noticed on other occasions, is the power of a noble example, that, before I knew it, I found myself wondering what I could do to help this man, and how I could relieve madame in the discharge of offices which her husband had as little right to expect at her hands as at mine. At the mere sound of the word Plague I knew she would be deserted in this wilderness by all, or nearly all; a reflection which suggested to me that I should first remove mademoiselle to a distance, and then consider what help I could afford here.

I was about to tell her the purpose with which I had come when a paroxysm more than ordinarily violent, and induced perhaps by the excitement of my presence—though he seemed beside himself—seized him, and threatened to tax her powers to the utmost. I could not look on and see her spend herself in vain; and almost before I knew what I was doing I had laid my hands on him and after a brief struggle thrust him back exhausted on the couch.

She looked at me so strangely after that that in the half-light which the loopholes afforded I tried in vain to read her meaning. 'Why did you come?' she cried at length, breathing quickly. 'You, of all men? Why did you come? He was no friend of yours, Heaven knows!'

'No, madame, nor I of his,' I answered bitterly, with a sudden revulsion of feeling.

'Then why are you here?' she retorted.

'I could not send one of my men,' I answered. 'And I want the key of the room above.'

At the mention of that—the room above—she flinched as if I had struck her, and looked as strangely at Bruhl as she had before looked at me. No doubt the reference to Mademoiselle de la Vire recalled to her mind her husband's wild passion for the girl, which for the moment she had forgotten. Nevertheless she did not speak, though her face turned very pale. She stooped over the couch, such as it was, and searching his clothes, presently stood up, and held out the key to me. 'Take it, and let her out,' she

said with a forced smile. 'Take it up yourself, and do it. You have done so much for her it is right that you should do this.'

I took the key, thanking her with more haste than thought, and turned towards the door, intending to go straight up to the floor above and release mademoiselle. My hand was already on the door, which madame, I found, had left ajar in the excitement of my entrance, when I heard her step behind me. The next instant she touched me on the shoulder. 'You fool!' she exclaimed, her eyes flashing, 'would you kill her? Would you go from him to her, and take the plague to her? God forgive me, it was in my mind to send you. And men are such puppets you would have gone!'

I trembled with horror, as much at my stupidity as at her craft. For she was right: in another moment I should have gone, and comprehension and remorse would have come too late. As it was, in my longing at once to reproach her for her wickedness and to thank her for her timely repentance, I found no words; but I turned away in silence and went out with a full heart.

CHAPTER XXX.

STRICKEN.

Outside the door, standing in the dimness of the landing, I found M. d'Agen. At any other time I should have been the first to ask him why he had left the post which I had assigned to him. But at the moment I was off my balance, and his presence suggested nothing more than that here was the very person who could best execute my wishes. I held out the key to him at arm's length, and bade him release Mademoiselle de la Vire, who was in the room above, and escort her out of the castle. 'Do not let her linger here,' I

continued urgently. 'Take her to the place where we found the wood-cutters. You need fear no resistance.'

'But Bruhl?' he said, as he took the key mechanically from me.

'He is out of the question,' I answered in a low voice. 'We have done with him. He has the plague.'

He uttered a sharp exclamation. 'What of madame, then?' he muttered.

'She is with him,' I said.

He cried out suddenly at that, sucking in his breath, as I have known men do in pain. And but that I drew back he would have laid his hand on my sleeve. 'With him?' he stammered. 'How is that?'

'Why, man, where else should she be?' I answered, forgetting that the sight of those two together had at first surprised me also, as well as moved me. 'Or who else should be with him? He is her husband.'

He stared at me for a moment at that, and then he turned slowly away and began to go up; while I looked after him, gradually thinking out the clue to his conduct. Could it be that it was not mademoiselle attracted him, but Madame de Bruhl?

And with that hint I understood it all. I saw in a moment the conclusion to which he had come on hearing of the presence of madame in my room. In my room at night! The change had dated from that time; instead of a careless, light-spirited youth he had become in a moment a morose and restive churl, as difficult to manage as an unbroken colt. Quite clearly I saw now the meaning of the change; why he had shrunk from me, and why all intercourse between us had been so difficult and so constrained.

I laughed to think how he had deceived himself, and how nearly I had come to deceiving myself also. And what more I might have thought I do not know, for my meditations were cut short at this point by a loud outcry below, which, beginning in one or two sharp cries of alarm and warning, culminated quickly in a roar of anger and dismay.

Fancying I recognised Maignan's voice, I ran down the stairs, seeking a loophole whence I could command the scene; but finding none, and becoming more and more alarmed, I descended to the court, which I found, to my great surprise, as empty and silent as an old battle-field. Neither on the enemy's side nor on ours was a single man to be seen. With growing dismay I sprang across the court and darted through the outer tower, only to find that and the gateway equally unguarded. Nor was it until I had passed through the latter, and stood on the brow of the slope, which we had had to clamber with so much toil, that I learned what was amiss.

Far below me a string of men, bounding and running at speed, streamed down the hill towards the horses. Some were shouting, some running silently, with their elbows at their sides and their scabbards leaping against their calves. The horses stood tethered in a ring near the edge of the wood, and by some oversight had been left unguarded. The foremost runner I made out to be Fresnoy; but a number of his men were close upon him, and then after an interval came Maignan, waving his blade and emitting frantic threats with every stride. Comprehending at once that Fresnoy and his following, rendered desperate by panic and the prospective loss of their horses, had taken advantage of my absence and given Maignan the slip, I saw I could do nothing save watch the result of the struggle.

This was not long delayed. Maignan's threats, which seemed to me mere waste of breath, were not without effect on those he followed. There is nothing which demoralises men like flight. Troopers who have stood charge after charge while victory was possible will fly like sheep, and like sheep allow themselves to be butchered, when they have once turned the back. So it was here. Many of Fresnoy's men were stout fellows, but having started to run they had no stomach for fighting. Their fears caused Maignan to appear near, while the horses seemed distant; and one after another they turned aside and made like rab-

bits for the wood. Only Fresnoy, who had taken care to have the start of all, kept on, and, reaching the horses, cut the rope which tethered the nearest, and vaulted nimbly on its back. Safely seated there, he tried to frighten the others into breaking loose; but not succeeding at the first attempt, and seeing Maignan, breathing vengeance, coming up with him, he started his horse, a bright bay, and rode off laughing along the edge of the wood.

Fully content with the result—for our carelessness might have cost us very dearly—I was about to turn away when I saw that Maignan had mounted and was preparing to follow. I stayed accordingly to see the end, and from my elevated position enjoyed a first-rate view of the race which ensued. Both were heavy weights, and at first Maignan gained no ground. But when a couple of hundred yards had been covered Fresnoy had the ill-luck to blunder into some heavy ground, and this enabling his pursuer, who had time to avoid it, to get within two-score paces of him, the race became as exciting as I could wish. Slowly and surely Maignan, who had chosen the Cid, reduced the distance between them to a score of paces—to fifteen—to ten. Then Fresnoy, becoming alarmed, began to look over his shoulder and ride in earnest. He had no whip, and I saw him raise his sheathed sword, and strike his beast on the flank. It sprang forward, and appeared for a few strides to be holding its own. Again he repeated the blow—but this time with a different result. While his hand was still in the air, his horse stumbled, as it seemed to me, made a desperate effort to recover itself, fell headlong and rolled over and over.

Something in the fashion of the fall, which reminded me of the mishap I had suffered on the way to Chizé, led me to look more particularly at the horse as it rose trembling to its feet, and stood with drooping head. Sure enough, a careful glance enabled me, even at that distance, to identify it as Matthew's bay—the trick-horse. Shading my eyes, and gazing on the scene with increased interest, I saw

Maignan, who had dismounted, stoop over something on the ground, and again after an interval stand upright.

But Fresnoy did not rise. Nor was it without awe that, guessing what had happened to him, I remembered how he had used this very horse to befool me; how heartlessly he had abandoned Matthew, its owner; and by what marvellous haps—which men call chances—Providence had brought it to this place, and put it in his heart to choose it out of a score which stood ready to his hand!

I was right. The man's neck was broken. He was quite dead. Maignan passed the word to one, and he to another, and so it reached me on the hill. It did not fail to awaken memories both grave and wholesome. I thought of St. Jean d'Angely, of Chizé, of the house in the Ruelle d'Arcy; then in the midst of these reflections I heard voices, and turned to find mademoiselle, with M. d'Agen behind me.

Her hand was still bandaged, and her dress, which she had not changed since leaving Blois, was torn and stained with mud. Her hair was in disorder; she walked with a limp. Fatigue and apprehension had stolen the colour from her cheeks, and in a word she looked, when I turned, so wan and miserable that for a moment I feared the plague had seized her.

The instant, however, that she caught sight of me a wave of colour invaded, not her cheeks only, but her brow and neck. From her hair to the collar of her gown she was all crimson. For a second she stood gazing at me, and then, as I saluted her, she sprang forward. Had I not stepped back she would have taken my hands.

My heart so overflowed with joy at this sight, that in the certainty her blush gave me I was fain to toy with my happiness. All jealousy of M. d'Agen was forgotten; only I thought it well not to alarm her by telling her what I knew of the Bruhls. 'Mademoiselle,' I said earnestly, bowing, but retreating from her, 'I thank God for your escape. One of your enemies lies helpless here, and another is dead yonder.'

'It is not of my enemies I am thinking,' she answered quickly, 'but of God, of whom you rightly remind me; and then of my friends.'

'Nevertheless,' I answered as quickly, 'I beg you will not stay to thank them now, but go down to the wood with M. d'Agen, who will do all that may be possible to make you comfortable.'

'And you, sir?' she said, with a charming air of confusion.

'I must stay here,' I answered, 'for a while.'

'Why?' she asked with a slight frown.

I did not know how to tell her, and I began lamely. 'Someone must stop with madame,' I said without thought.

'Madame?' she exclaimed. 'Does she require assistance? I will stop.'

'God forbid!' I cried.

I do not know how she understood the words, but her face, which had been full of softness, grew hard. She moved quickly towards me; but, mindful of the danger I carried about me, I drew farther back. 'No nearer, mademoiselle,' I murmured, 'if you please.'

She looked puzzled, and finally angry, turning away with a sarcastic bow. 'So be it, then, sir,' she said proudly, 'if you desire it. M. d'Agen, if you are not afraid of me, will you lead me down?'

I stood and watched them go down the hill, comforting myself with the reflection that to-morrow, or the next day, or within a few days at most, all would be well. Scanning her figure as she moved, I fancied that she went with less spirit as the space increased between us. And I pleased myself with the notion. A few days, a few hours, I thought, and all would be well. The sunset which blazed in the west was no more than a faint reflection of the glow which for a few minutes pervaded my mind, long accustomed to cold prospects and the chill of neglect.

A term was put to these pleasant imaginings by the arrival of Maignan; who, panting from the ascent of the hill,

informed me with a shamefaced air that the tale of horses was complete, but that four of our men were missing, and had doubtless gone off with the fugitives. These proved to be M. d'Agen's two lackeys and the two varlets M. de Rambouillet had lent us. There remained besides Simon Fleix only Maignan's three men from Rosny; but the state in which our affairs now stood enabled us to make light of this. I informed the equerry—who visibly paled at the news—that M. de Bruhl lay ill of the plague, and like to die; and I bade him form a camp in the wood below, and, sending for food to the house where we had slept the night before, make mademoiselle as comfortable as circumstances permitted.

He listened with surprise, and when I had done asked with concern what I intended to do myself.

'Someone must remain with Madame de Bruhl,' I answered. 'I have already been to the bedside to procure the key of mademoiselle's room, and I run no farther risk. All I ask is that you will remain in the neighbourhood, and furnish us with supplies should it be necessary.'

He looked at me with emotion, which, strongly in conflict with his fears as it was, touched me not a little. 'But morbleu! M. de Marsac,' he said, 'you will take the plague and die.'

'If God wills,' I answered, very lugubriously I confess, for pale looks in one commonly so fearless could not but depress me. 'But if not, I shall escape. Any way, my friend,' I continued, 'I owe you a quittance. Simon Fleix has an inkhorn and paper. Bid him bring them to this stone and leave them, and I will write that Maignan, the equerry of the Baron de Rosny, served me to the end as a brave soldier and an honest friend. What, *mon ami?*' I continued, for I saw that he was overcome by this, which was, indeed, a happy thought of mine. 'Why not? It is true, and will aquit you with the Baron. Do it, and go. Advise M. d'Agen, and be to him what you have been to me.'

He swore two or three great oaths, such as men of his kind use to hide an excess of feeling, and after some further remonstrance went away to carry out my orders; leaving me to stand on the brow in a strange kind of solitude, and watch horses and men withdraw to the wood, until the whole valley seemed left to me and stillness and the grey evening. For a time I stood in thought. Then reminding myself, for a fillip to my spirits, that I had been far more alone when I walked the streets of St. Jean friendless and threadbare (than I was now), I turned, and swinging my scabbard against my boots for company, stumbled through the dark, silent courtyard, and mounted as cheerfully as I could to madame's room.

To detail all that passed during the next five days would be tedious and in indifferent taste, seeing that I am writing this memoir for the perusal of men of honour; for though I consider the offices which the whole can perform for the sick to be worthy of the attention of every man, however well born, who proposes to see service, they seem to be more honourable in the doing than the telling. One episode, however, which marked those days filled me then, as it does now, with the most lively pleasure; and that was the unexpected devotion displayed by Simon Fleix, who, coming to me, refused to leave, and showed himself at this pinch to be possessed of such sterling qualities that I freely forgave him the deceit he had formerly practised on me. The fits of moody silence into which he still fell at times and an occasional irascibility seemed to show that he had not altogether conquered his insane fancy; but the mere fact that he had come to me in a situation of hazard, and voluntarily removed himself from mademoiselle's neighbourhood, gave me good hope for the future.

M. de Bruhl died early on the morning of the second day, and Simon and I buried him at noon. He was a man of courage and address, lacking only principles. In spite of madame's grief and prostration, which were as great as though she had lost the best husband in the world, we re-

moved before night to a separate camp in the woods; and left with the utmost relief the grey ruin on the hill, in which, it seemed to me, we had lived an age. In our new bivouac, where, game being abundant, and the weather warm, we lacked no comfort, except the society of our friends, we remained four days longer. On the fifth morning we met the others of our company by appointment on the north road, and commenced the return journey.

Thankful that we had escaped contagion, we nevertheless still proposed to observe for a time such precautions in regard to the others as seemed necessary; riding in the rear and having no communication with them, though they showed by signs the pleasure they felt at seeing us. From the frequency with which mademoiselle turned and looked behind her, I judged she had overcome her pique at my strange conduct; which the others should by this time have explained to her. Content, therefore, with the present, and full of confidence in the future, I rode along in a rare state of satisfaction; at one moment planning what I would do, and at another reviewing what I had done.

The brightness and softness of the day, and the beauty of the woods, which in some places, I remember, were bursting into leaf, contributed much to establish me in this frame of mind. The hateful mist, which had so greatly depressed us, had disappeared; leaving the face of the country visible in all the brilliance of early spring. The men who rode before us, cheered by the happy omen, laughed and talked as they rode, or tried the paces of their horses, where the trees grew sparsely; and their jests and laughter coming pleasantly to our ears as we followed, warmed even madame's sad face to a semblance of happiness.

I was riding along in this state of contentment when a feeling of fatigue, which the distance we had come did not seem to justify, led me to spur the Cid into a brisker pace. The sensation of lassitude still continued, however, and indeed grew worse; so that I wondered idly whether I had

over-eaten myself at my last meal. Then the thing passed for a while from my mind, which the descent of a steep hill sufficiently occupied.

But a few minutes later, happening to turn in the saddle, I experienced a strange and sudden dizziness; so excessive as to force me to grasp the cantle, and cling to it, while trees and hills appeared to dance round me. A quick, hot pain in the side followed, almost before I recovered the power of thought; and this increased so rapidly, and was from the first so definite, that, with a dreadful apprehension already formed in my mind, I thrust my hand inside my clothes, and found that swelling which is the most sure and deadly symptom of the plague.

The horror of that moment—in which I saw all those things on the possession of which I had just been congratulating myself, pass hopelessly from me, leaving me in dreadful gloom—I will not attempt to describe in this place. Let it suffice that the world lost in a moment its joyousness, the sunshine its warmth. The greenness and beauty round me, which an instant before had filled me with pleasure, seemed on a sudden no more than a grim and cruel jest at my expense, and I an atom perishing unmarked and unnoticed. Yes, an atom, a mote; the bitterness of that feeling I well remember. Then, in no long time—being a soldier—I recovered my coolness, and, retaining the power to think, decided what it behoved me to do.

CHAPTER XXXI.

UNDER THE GREENWOOD.

To escape from my companions on some pretext, which should enable me to ensure their safety without arousing their fears, was the one thought which possessed me on

the subsidence of my first alarm. Probably it answered to that instinct in animals which bids them get away alone when wounded or attacked by disease; and with me it had the fuller play as the pain prevailed rather by paroxysms than in permanence, and, coming and going, allowed intervals of ease, in which I was able to think clearly and consecutively, and even to sit firmly in the saddle.

The moment one of these intervals enabled me to control myself, I used it to think where I might go without danger to others; and at once and naturally my thoughts turned to the last place we had passed; which happened to be the house in the gorge where we had received news of Bruhl's divergence from the road. The man who lived there alone had had the plague; therefore he did not fear it. The place itself was solitary, and I could reach it, riding slowly, in half an hour. On the instant and without more delay I determined on this course. I would return, and, committing myself to the fellow's good offices, bid him deny me to others, and especially to my friends—should they seek me.

Aware that I had no time to lose if I would put this plan into execution before the pains returned to sap my courage, I drew bridle at once, and muttered some excuse to madame; if I remember rightly, that I had dropped my gauntlet. Whatever the pretext—and my dread was great lest she should observe any strangeness in my manner—it passed with her; by reason, chiefly, I think, of the grief which monopolised her. She let me go, and before anyone else could mark or miss me I was a hundred yards away on the back-track, and already sheltered from observation by a turn in the road.

The excitement of my evasion supported me for a while after leaving her; and then for another while, a paroxysm of pain deprived me of the power of thought. But when this last was over, leaving me weak and shaken, yet clear in my mind, the most miserable sadness and depression that can be conceived came upon me; and, accompanying me through the wood, filled its avenues (which doubtless

were fair enough to others' eyes) with the blackness of despair. I saw but the charnel-house, and that everywhere. It was not only that the horrors of the first discovery returned upon me and almost unmanned me; nor only that regrets and memories, pictures of the past and plans for the future, crowded thick upon my mind, so that I could have wept at the thought of all ending here. But in my weakness mademoiselle's face shone where the wood was darkest, and, tempting and provoking me to return—were it only to tell her that, grim and dull as I seemed, I loved her—tried me with a subtle temptation almost beyond my strength to resist. All that was mean in me rose in arms, all that was selfish clamoured to know why I must die in the ditch while others rode in the sunshine; why I must go to the pit, while others loved and lived!

And so hard was I pressed that I think I should have given way had the ride been longer or my horse less smooth and nimble. But in the midst of my misery, which bodily pain was beginning to augment to such a degree that I could scarcely see, and had to ride gripping the saddle with both hands, I reached the mill. My horse stopped of its own accord. The man we had seen before came out. I had just strength left to tell him what was the matter, and what I wanted; and then a fresh attack came on, with sickness, and overcome by vertigo I fell to the ground.

I have but an indistinct idea what happened after that; until I found myself inside the house, clinging to the man's arm. He pointed to a box-bed in one corner of the room (which was, or seemed to my sick eyes, gloomy and darksome in the extreme), and would have had me lie down in it. But something inside me revolted against the bed, and despite the force he used, I broke away, and threw myself on a heap of straw which I saw in another corner.

'Is not the bed good enough for you?' he grumbled.

I strove to tell him it was not that.

'It should be good enough to die on,' he continued brutally. 'There's five have died on that bed, I'd have you

know! My wife one, and my son another, and my daughter another; and then my son again, and a daughter again. Five! Ay, five in that bed!'

Brooding in the gloom of the chimney-corner, where he was busied about a black pot, he continued to mutter and glance at me askance; but after a while I swooned away with pain.

When I opened my eyes again the room was darker. The man still sat where I had last seen him, but a noise, the same, perhaps, which had roused me, drew him as I looked to the unglazed window. A voice outside, the tones of which I seemed to know, inquired if he had seen me; and so carried away was I by the excitement of the moment that I rose on my elbow to hear the answer. But the man was staunch. I heard him deny all knowledge of me, and presently the sound of retreating hoofs and the echo of voices dying in the distance assured me I was left.

Then, at that instant, a doubt of the man on whose compassion I had thrown myself entered my mind. Plague-stricken, hopeless as I was, it chilled me to the very heart; staying in a moment the feeble tears I was about to shed, and curing even the vertigo, which forced me to clutch at the straw on which I lay. Whether the thought arose from a sickly sense of my own impotence, or was based on the fellow's morose air and the stealthy glances he continued to cast at me, I am as unable to say as I am to decide whether it was well-founded, or the fruit of my own fancy. Possibly the gloom of the room and the man's surly words inclined me to suspicion; possibly his secret thoughts portrayed themselves in his hang-dog visage. Afterwards it appeared that he had stripped me, while I lay, of everything of value; but he may have done this in the belief that I should die.

All I know is that I knew nothing certain, because the fear died almost as soon as it was born. The man had scarcely seated himself again, or I conceived the thought, when a second alarm outside caused him to spring to his

feet. Scowling and muttering as he went, he hurried to the window. But before he reached it the door was dashed violently open, and Simon Fleix stood in the entrance.

There came in with him so blessed a rush of light and life as in a moment dispelled the horror of the room, and stripped me at one and the same time of fear and manhood. For whether I would or no, at sight of the familiar face, which I had fled so lately, I burst into tears; and, stretching out my hands to him, as a frightened child might have done, called on him by name. I suppose the plague was by this time so plainly written on my face that all who looked might read; for he stood at gaze, staring at me, and was still so standing when a hand put him aside and a slighter, smaller figure, pale-faced and hooded, stood for a moment between me and the sunshine. It was mademoiselle!

That, I thank God, restored me to myself, or I had been for ever shamed. I cried to them with all the voice I had left to take her away; and calling out frantically again and again that I had the plague and she would die, I bade the man close the door. Nay, regaining something of strength in my fear for her, I rose up, half-dressed as I was, and would have fled into some corner to avoid her, still calling out to them to take her away, to take her away—if a fresh paroxysm had not seized me, so that I fell blind and helpless where I was.

For a time after that I knew nothing; until someone held water to my lips, and I drank greedily, and presently awoke to the fact that the entrance was dark with faces and figures all gazing at me as I lay. But I could not see her; and I had sense enough to know and be thankful that she was no longer among them. I would fain have bidden Maignan begone too, for I read the consternation in his face. But I could not muster strength or voice for the purpose, and when I turned my head to see who held me—ah me! it comes back to me still in dreams—it was mademoiselle's hair that swept my forehead and her hand that ministered to me; while tears she did not try to hide or

wipe away fell on my hot cheek. I could have pushed her away even then, for she was slight and small; but the pains came upon me, and with a sob choking my voice I lost all knowledge.

I am told that I lay for more than a month between life and death, now burning with fever and now in the cold fit; and that but for the tendance which never failed nor faltered, nor could have been outdone had my malady been the least infectious in the world, I must have died a hundred times, as hundreds round me did die week by week in that year. From the first they took me out of the house (where I think I should have perished quickly, so impregnated was it with the plague poison) and laid me under a screen of boughs in the forest, with a vast quantity of cloaks and horse-cloths cunningly disposed to windward. Here I ran some risk from cold and exposure and the fall of heavy dews; but, on the other hand, had all the airs of heaven to clear away the humours and expel the fever from my brain.

Hence it was that when the first feeble beginnings of consciousness awoke in me again, they and the light stole in on me through green leaves, and overhanging boughs, and the freshness and verdure of the spring woods. The sunshine which reached my watery eyes was softened by its passage through great trees, which grew and expanded as I gazed up into them, until each became a verdant world, with all a world's diversity of life. Grown tired of this, I had still long avenues of shade, carpeted with flowers, to peer into; or a little wooded bottom—where the ground fell away on one side—that blazed and burned with red-thorn. Ay, and hence it was that the first sounds I heard, when the fever left me at last, and I knew morning from evening, and man from woman, were the songs of birds calling to their mates.

Mademoiselle and Madame de Bruhl, with Fanchette and Simon Fleix, lay all this time in such shelter as could be raised for them where I lay; M. François and three stout fellows, whom Maignan left to guard us, living in a hut

within hail. Maignan himself, after seeing out a week of my illness, had perforce returned to his master, and no news had since been received from him. Thanks to the timely move into the woods, no other of the party fell ill, and by the time I was able to stand and speak the ravages of the disease had so greatly decreased that fear was at an end.

I should waste words were I to try to describe how the peace and quietude of the life we led in the forest during the time of my recovery sank into my heart; which had known, save by my mother's bedside, little of such joys. To awake in the morning to sweet sounds and scents, to eat with reviving appetite and feel the slow growth of strength, to lie all day in shade or sunshine as it pleased me, and hear women's voices and tinkling laughter, to have no thought of the world and no knowledge of it, so that we might have been, for anything we saw, in another sphere—these things might have sufficed for happiness without that which added to each and every one of them a sweeter and deeper and more lasting joy. Of which next.

I had not begun to take notice long before I saw that M. François and madame had come to an understanding; such an one, at least, as permitted him to do all for her comfort and entertainment without committing her to more than was becoming at such a season. Naturally this left mademoiselle much in my company; a circumstance which would have ripened into passion the affection I before entertained for her, had not gratitude and a nearer observance of her merits already elevated the feeling into the most ardent worship that even the youngest lover ever felt for his mistress.

In proportion, however, as I and my love grew stronger, and mademoiselle's presence grew more necessary to my happiness—so that were she away but an hour I fell a-moping—she began to draw off from me, and absenting herself more and more on long walks in the woods, by-and-by reduced me to such a pitch of misery as bid fair to complete what the fever had left undone.

If this had happened in the world I think it likely that I should have suffered in silence. But here, under the greenwood, in common enjoyment of God's air and earth, we seemed more nearly equal. She was scarce better dressed than a sutler's wife; while recollections of her wealth and station, though they assailed me nightly, lost much of their point in presence of her youth and of that fair and patient gentleness which forest life and the duties of a nurse had fostered.

So it happened that one day, when she had been absent longer than usual, I took my courage in my hand and went to meet her as far as the stream which ran through the bottom by the redthorn. Here, at a place where there were three stepping-stones, I waited for her; first taking away the stepping-stones, that she might have to pause, and, being at a loss, might be glad to see me.

She came presently, tripping through an alley in the low wood, with her eyes on the ground, and her whole carriage full of a sweet pensiveness which it did me good to see. I turned my back on the stream before she saw me, and made a pretence of being taken up with something in another direction. Doubtless she espied me soon, and before she came very near; but she made no sign until she reached the brink, and found the stepping-stones were gone.

Then, whether she suspected me or not, she called out to me, not once, but several times. For, partly to tantalise her, as lovers will, and partly because it charmed me to hear her use my name, I would not turn at once.

When I did, and discovered her standing with one small foot dallying with the water, I cried out with well-affected concern; and in a great hurry ran towards her, paying no attention to her chiding or the pettish haughtiness with which she spoke to me.

'The stepping-stones are all on your side,' she said imperiously. 'Who has moved them?'

I looked about without answering, and at last pretended to find them; while she stood watching me, tapping the

ground with one foot the while. Despite her impatience, the stone which was nearest to her I took care to bring last —that she might not cross without my assistance. But after all she stepped over so lightly and quickly that the hand she placed in mine seemed scarcely to rest there a second. Yet when she was over I managed to retain it; nor did she resist, though her cheek, which had been red before, turned crimson and her eyes fell, and bound to me by the link of her little hand, she stood beside me with her whole figure drooping.

'Mademoiselle,' I said gravely, summoning all my resolution to my aid, 'do you know of what that stream with its stepping-stones reminds me?'

She shook her head but did not answer.

'Of the stream which has flowed between us from the day when I first saw you at St. Jean,' I said in a low voice. 'It has flowed between us, and it still does—separating us.'

'What stream?' she murmured, with her eyes cast down, and her foot playing with the moss. 'You speak in riddles, sir.'

'You understand this one only too well, mademoiselle,' I answered. 'Are you not young and gay and beautiful, while I am old, or almost old, and dull and grave? You are rich and well-thought-of at Court, and I a soldier of fortune, not too successful. What did you think of me when you first saw me at St. Jean? What when I came to Rosny? That, mademoiselle,' I continued with fervour, 'is the stream which flows between us and separates us; and I know of but one stepping-stone that can bridge it.'

She looked aside, toying with a piece of thorn-blossom she had picked. It was not redder than her cheeks.

'That one stepping-stone,' I said, after waiting vainly for any word or sign from her, 'is Love. Many weeks ago, mademoiselle, when I had little cause to like you, I loved you; I loved you whether I would or not, and without thought or hope of return. I should have been mad had I spoken to you then. Mad, and worse than mad. But now,

now that I owe you my life, now that I have drunk from your hand in fever, and, awaking early and late, have found you by my pillow—now that, seeing you come in and out in the midst of fear and hardship, I have learned to regard you as a woman kind and gentle as my mother—now that I love you, so that to be with you is joy, and away from you grief, is it presumption in me now, mademoiselle, to think that that stream may be bridged?'

I stopped, out of breath, and saw that she was trembling. But she spoke presently. 'You said one stepping-stone?' she murmured.

'Yes,' I answered hoarsely, trying in vain to look at her face, which she kept averted from me.

'There should be two,' she said, almost in a whisper. 'Your love, sir, and—and mine. You have said much of the one, and nothing of the other. In that you are wrong, for I am proud still. And I would not cross the stream you speak of for any love of yours!'

'Ah!' I cried in sharpest pain.

'But,' she continued, looking up at me on a sudden with eyes that told me all, 'because I love you I am willing to cross it—to cross it once for ever, and live beyond it all my life—if I may live my life with you.'

I fell on my knee and kissed her hand again and again in a rapture of joy and gratitude. By-and-by she pulled it from me. 'If you will, sir,' she said, 'you may kiss my lips. If you do not, no man ever will.'

After that, as may be guessed, we walked every day in the forest, making longer and longer excursions as my strength came back to me, and the nearer parts grew familiar. From early dawn, when I brought my love a posy of flowers, to late evening, when Fanchette hurried her from me, our days were passed in a long round of delight; being filled full of all beautiful things—love, and sunshine, and rippling streams, and green banks, on which we sat together under scented limes, telling one another all we had ever thought, and especially all we had ever thought of

one another. Sometimes—when the light was low in the evening—we spoke of my mother; and once—but that was in the sunshine, when the bees were humming and my blood had begun to run strongly in my veins—I spoke of my great and distant kinsman, Rohan. But mademoiselle would hear nothing of him, murmuring again and again in my ear, 'I have crossed, my love, I have crossed.'

Truly the sands of that hour-glass were of gold. But in time they ran out. First M. François, spurred by the restlessness of youth, and convinced that madame would for a while yield no farther, left us, and went back to the world. Then news came of great events that could not fail to move us. The King of France and the King of Navarre had met at Tours, and embracing in the sight of an immense multitude, had repulsed the League with slaughter in the suburb of St. Symphorien. Fast on this followed the tidings of their march northwards with an overwhelming army of fifty-thousand men of both religions, bent, rumour had it, on the signal punishment of Paris.

I grew—shame that I should say it—to think more and more of these things; until mademoiselle, reading the signs, told me one day that we must go. 'Though never again,' she added with a sigh, 'shall we be so happy.'

'Then why go?' I asked foolishly.

'Because you are a man,' she answered with a wise smile, 'as I would have you be, and you need something besides love. To-morrow we will go.'

'Whither?' I said in amazement.

'To the camp before Paris,' she answered. 'We will go back in the light of day—seeing that we have done nothing of which to be ashamed—and throw ourselves on the justice of the King of Navarre. You shall place me with Madame Catherine, who will not refuse to protect me; and so, sweet, you will have only yourself to think of. Come, sir,' she continued, laying her little hand in mine, and looking into my eyes, 'you are not afraid?'

'I am more afraid than ever I used to be,' I said trembling.

'So I would have it,' she whispered, hiding her face on my shoulder. 'Nevertheless we will go.'

And go we did. The audacity of such a return in the face of Turenne, who was doubtless in the King of Navarre's suite, almost took my breath away; nevertheless, I saw that it possessed one advantage which no other course promised—that, I mean, of setting us right in the eyes of the world, and enabling me to meet in a straightforward manner such as maligned us. After some consideration I gave my assent, merely conditioning that until we reached the Court we should ride masked, and shun as far as possible encounters by the road.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A TAVERN BRAWL.

On the following day, accordingly, we started. But the news of the two kings' successes, and particularly the certainty which these had bred in many minds that nothing short of a miracle could save Paris, had moved so many gentlemen to take the road that we found the inns crowded beyond example, and were frequently forced into meetings which made the task of concealing our identity more difficult and hazardous than I had expected. Sometimes shelter was not to be obtained on any terms, and then we had to lie in the fields or in any convenient shed. Moreover, the passage of the army had swept the country so bare both of food and forage, that these commanded astonishing prices; and a long day's ride more than once brought us to our destination without securing for us the ample meal we had earned, and required.

Under these circumstances, it was with joy little short of transport that I recognised the marvellous change which had come over my mistress. Bearing all without a mur-

mur, or a frown, or so much as one complaining word, she acted on numberless occasions so as to convince me that she spoke truly—albeit I scarcely dared to believe it—when she said that she had but one trouble in the world, and that was the prospect of our coming separation.

For my part, and despite some gloomy moments, when fear of the future overcame me, I rode in Paradise riding by my mistress. It was her presence which glorified alike the first freshness of the morning, when we started with all the day before us, and the coolness of the late evening, when we rode hand-in-hand. Nor could I believe without an effort that I was the same Gaston de Marsac whom she had once spurned and disdained. God knows I was thankful for her love. A thousand times, thinking of my grey hairs, I asked her if she did not repent; and a thousand times she answered No, with so much happiness in her eyes that I was fain to thank God again and believe her.

Notwithstanding the inconvenience of the practice, we made it a rule to wear our masks whenever we appeared in public; and this rule we kept more strictly as we approached Paris. It exposed us to some comment and more curiosity, but led to no serious trouble until we reached Etampes, twelve leagues from the capital; where we found the principal inn so noisy and crowded, and so much disturbed by the constant coming and going of couriers, that it required no experience to predicate the neighbourhood of the army. The great courtyard seemed to be choked with a confused mass of men and horses, through which we made our way with difficulty. The windows of the house were all open, and offered us a view of tables surrounded by men eating and drinking hastily, as the manner of travellers is. The gateway and the steps of the house were lined with troopers and servants and sturdy rogues; who scanned all who passed in or out, and not unfrequently followed them with ribald jests and nicknames. Songs and oaths, brawling and laughter, with the neighing of horses and the huzzas of the beggars, who shouted whenever a fresh party arrived,

rose above all, and increased the reluctance with which I assisted madame and mademoiselle to dismount

Simon was no match for such an occasion as this; but the stalwart aspect of the three men whom Maignan had left with me commanded respect, and attended by two of these I made a way for the ladies—not without some opposition and a few oaths—to enter the house. The landlord, whom we found crushed into a corner inside, and entirely overborne by the crowd which had invaded his dwelling, assured me that he had not the smallest garret he could place at my disposal; but I presently succeeded in finding a small room at the top, which I purchased from the four men who had taken possession of it. As it was impossible to get anything to eat there, I left a man on guard, and myself descended with madame and mademoiselle to the eating-room, a large chamber set with long boards, and filled with a rough and noisy crew. Under a running fire of observations we entered, and found with difficulty three seats in an inner corner of the room.

I ran my eye over the company, and noticed among them, besides a dozen travelling parties like our own, specimens of all those classes which are to be found in the rear of an army. There were some officers and more horse-dealers; half a dozen forage-agents and a few priests; with a large sprinkling of adventurers, bravos, and led-captains, and here and there two or three whose dress and the deference paid to them by their neighbours seemed to indicate a higher rank. Conspicuous among these last were a party of four who occupied a small table by the door. An attempt had been made to secure some degree of privacy for them by interposing a settle between them and the room; and their attendants, who seemed to be numerous, did what they could to add to this by filling the gap with their persons. One of the four, a man of handsome dress and bearing, who sat in the place of honour, was masked, as we were. The gentleman at his right hand I could not see. The others, whom I could see, were strangers to me.

Some time elapsed before our people succeeded in procuring us any food, and during the interval we were exposed to an amount of comment on the part of those round us which I found very little to my liking. There were not half a dozen women present, and this and our masks rendered my companions unpleasantly conspicuous. Aware, however, of the importance of avoiding an altercation which might possibly detain us, and would be certain to add to our notoriety, I remained quiet; and presently the entrance of a tall, dark-complexioned man, who carried himself with a peculiar swagger, and seemed to be famous for something or other, diverted the attention of the company from us.

The new-comer was somewhat of Maignan's figure. He wore a back and breast over a green doublet, and had an orange feather in his cap and an orange-lined cloak on his shoulder. On entering he stood a moment in the doorway, letting his bold black eyes rove round the room, the while he talked in a loud braggart fashion to his companions. There was a lack of breeding in the man's air, and something offensive in his look; which I noticed produced wherever it rested a momentary silence and constraint. When he moved farther into the room I saw that he wore a very long sword, the point of which trailed a foot behind him.

He chose out for his first attentions the party of four whom I have mentioned; going up to them and accosting them with a ruffling air, directed especially to the gentleman in the mask. The latter lifted his head haughtily on finding himself addressed by a stranger, but did not offer to answer. Someone else did, however, for a sudden bellow like that of an enraged bull proceeded from behind the settle. The words were lost in noise, the unseen speaker's anger seeming so overpowering that he could not articulate; but the tone and voice, which were in some way familiar to me, proved enough for the bully, who, covering his retreat with a profound bow, backed out rapidly, muttering what was doubtless an apology. Cocking his hat more

fiercely to make up for this repulse, he next proceeded to patrol the room, scowling from side to side as he went, with the evident intention of picking a quarrel with someone less formidable.

By ill-chance his eye lit, as he turned, on our masks. He said something to his companions; and encouraged, no doubt, by the position of our seats at the board, which led him to think us people of small consequence, he came to a stop opposite us.

'What! more dukes here?' he cried scoffingly. 'Hallo, you sir!' he continued to me, 'will you not unmask and drink a glass with me?'

I thanked him civilly, but declined.

His insolent eyes were busy, while I spoke, with madame's fair hair and handsome figure, which her mask failed to hide. 'Perhaps the ladies will have better taste, sir,' he said rudely. 'Will they not honour us with a sight of their pretty faces?'

Knowing the importance of keeping my temper I put constraint on myself, and answered, still with civility, that they were greatly fatigued and were about to retire.

'Zounds!' he cried, 'that is not to be borne. If we are to lose them so soon, the more reason we should enjoy their *beaux yeux* while we can. A short life and a merry one, sir. This is not a nunnery, nor, I dare swear, are your fair friends nuns.'

Though I longed to chastise him for this insult, I feigned deafness, and went on with my meal as if I had not heard him; and the table being between us prevented him going beyond words. After he had uttered one or two coarse jests of a similar character, which cost us less as we were masked, and our emotions could only be guessed, the crowd about us, seeing I took the thing quietly, began to applaud him; but more as it seemed to me out of fear than love. In this opinion I was presently confirmed on hearing from Simon—who whispered the information in my ear as he handed a dish—that the fellow was an Italian captain in

the king's pay, famous for his skill with the sword and the many duels in which he had displayed it.

Mademoiselle, though she did not know this, bore with his insolence with a patience which astonished me; while madame appeared unconscious of it. Nevertheless, I was glad when he retired and left us in peace. I seized the moment of his absence to escort the ladies through the room and upstairs to their apartment, the door of which I saw locked and secured. That done I breathed more freely; and feeling thankful that I had been able to keep my temper, took the episode to be at an end.

But in this I was mistaken, as I found when I returned to the room in which we had supped, my intention being to go through it to the stables. I had not taken two paces across the floor before I found my road blocked by the Italian, and read alike in his eyes and in the faces of the company—of whom many hastened to climb the tables to see what passed—that the meeting was premeditated. The man's face was flushed with wine; proud of his many victories, he eyed me with a boastful contempt my patience had perhaps given him the right to feel.

'Ha! well met, sir,' he said, sweeping the floor with his cap in an exaggeration of respect, 'now, perhaps, your high-mightiness will condescend to unmask? The table is no longer between us, nor are your fair friends here to protect their *cher ami!*'

'If I still refuse, sir,' I said civilly, wavering between anger and prudence, and hoping still to avoid a quarrel which might endanger us all, 'be good enough to attribute it to private motives, and to no desire to disoblige you.'

'No, I do not think you wish to disoblige me,' he answered, laughing scornfully—and a dozen voices echoed the gibe. 'But for your private motives, the devil take them! Is that plain enough, sir?'

'It is plain enough to show me that you are an ill-bred man!' I answered, choler getting the better of me. 'Let me pass, sir.'

'Unmask!' he retorted, moving so as still to detain me, 'or shall I call in the grooms to perform the office for you?'

Seeing at last that all my attempts to evade the man only fed his vanity, and encouraged him to further excesses, and that the motley crowd, who filled the room and already formed a circle round us, had made up their minds to see sport, I would no longer balk them; I could no longer do it, indeed, with honour. I looked round, therefore, for someone whom I might enlist as my second, but I saw no one with whom I had the least acquaintance. The room was lined from table to ceiling with mocking faces and scornful eyes all turned to me.

My opponent saw the look, and misread it; being much accustomed, I imagine, to a one-sided battle. He laughed contemptuously. 'No, my friend, there is no way out of it,' he said. 'Let me see your pretty face, or fight.'

'So be it,' I said quietly. 'If I have no other choice, I will fight.'

'In your mask?' he cried incredulously.

'Yes,' I said sternly, feeling every nerve tingle with long-suppressed rage. 'I will fight as I am. Off with your back and breast, if you are a man. And I will so deal with you that if you see to-morrow's sun you shall need a mask for the rest of your days!'

'Ho! ho!' he answered, scowling at me in surprise, 'you sing in a different key now. But I will put a term to it. There is space enough between these tables, if you can use your weapon; and much more than you will need to-morrow.'

'To-morrow will show,' I retorted.

Without more ado he unfastened the buckles of his breast-piece, and relieving himself of it, stepped back a pace. Those of the bystanders who occupied the part of the room he indicated—a space bounded by four tables, and not unfit for the purpose, though somewhat confined—hastened to get out of it, and seize instead upon neighbouring posts of 'vantage. The man's reputation was such, and his fame so

great, that on all sides I heard naught but wagers offered against me at odds; but this circumstance, which might have flurried a younger man and numbed his arm, served only to set me on making the most of such openings as the fellow's presumption and certainty of success would be sure to afford.

The news of the challenge running through the house had brought together by this time so many people as to fill the room from end to end, and even to obscure the light, which was beginning to wane. At the last moment, when we were on the point of engaging, a slight commotion marked the admission to the front of three or four persons, whose consequence or attendants gained them this advantage. I believed them to be the party of four I have mentioned, but at the time I could not be certain.

In the few seconds of waiting while this went forward I examined our relative positions with the fullest intention of killing the man—whose glittering eyes and fierce smile filled me with a loathing which was very nearly hatred—if I could. The line of windows lay to my right and his left. The evening light fell across us, whitening the row of faces on my left, but leaving those on my right in shadow. It occurred to me on the instant that my mask was actually an advantage, seeing that it protected my sight from the side-light, and enabled me to watch his eyes and point with more concentration.

'You will be the twenty-third man I have killed!' he said boastfully, as we crossed swords and stood an instant on guard.

'Take care!' I answered. 'You have twenty-three against you!'

A swift lunge was his only answer. I parried it, and thrust, and we fell to work. We had not exchanged half a dozen blows, however, before I saw that I should need all the advantage which my mask and greater caution gave me. I had met my match, and it might be something more; but that for a time it was impossible to tell. He had the longer

weapon, and I the longer reach. He preferred the point, after the new Italian fashion, and I the blade. He was somewhat flushed with wine, while my arm had scarcely recovered the strength of which illness had deprived me. On the other hand, excited at the first by the cries of his backers, he played rather wildly; while I held myself prepared, and keeping up a strong guard, waited cautiously for any opening or mistake on his part.

The crowd round us, which had hailed our first passes with noisy cries of derision and triumph, fell silent after a while, surprised and taken aback by their champion's failure to spit me at the first onslaught. My reluctance to engage had led them to predict a short fight and an easy victory.

Convinced of the contrary, they began to watch each stroke with bated breath; or now and again, muttering the name of Jarnac, broke into brief exclamations as a blow more savage than usual drew sparks from our blades, and made the rafters ring with the harsh grinding of steel on steel.

The surprise of the crowd, however, was a small thing compared with that of my adversary. Impatience, disgust, rage, and doubt chased one another in turn across his flushed features. Apprised that he had to do with a swordsman, he put forth all his power. With spite in his eyes he laboured blow on blow, he tried one form of attack after another, he found me equal, if barely equal, to all. And then at last there came a change. The perspiration gathered on his brow, the silence disconcerted him; he felt his strength failing under the strain, and suddenly, I think, the possibility of defeat and death, unthought of before, burst upon him. I heard him groan, and for a moment he fenced wildly. Then he again recovered himself. But now I read terror in his eyes, and knew that the moment of retribution was at hand. With his back to the table, and my point threatening his breast, he knew at last what those others had felt!

He would fain have stopped to breathe, but I would not

let him though my blows also were growing feeble, and my guard weaker; for I knew that if I gave him time to recover himself he would have recourse to other tricks, and might out-manœuvre me in the end. As it was, my black unchanging mask, which always confronted him, which hid all emotions and veiled even fatigue, had grown to be full of terror to him—full of blank, passionless menace. He could not tell how I fared, or what I thought, or how my strength stood. A superstitious dread was on him, and threatened to overpower him. Ignorant who I was or whence I came, he feared and doubted, grappling with monstrous suspicions, which the fading light encouraged. His face broke out in blotches, his breath came and went in gasps, his eyes began to protrude. Once or twice they quitted mine for a part of a second to steal a despairing glance at the rows of onlookers that ran to right and left of us. But he read no pity there.

At last the end came—more suddenly than I had looked for it, but I think he was unnerved. His hand lost its grip of the hilt, and a parry which I dealt a little more briskly than usual sent the weapon flying among the crowd, as much to my astonishment as to that of the spectators. A volley of oaths and exclamations hailed the event; and for a moment I stood at gaze, eyeing him watchfully. He shrank back; then he made for a moment as if he would fling himself upon me dagger in hand. But seeing my point steady, he recoiled a second time, his face distorted with rage and fear.

'Go!' I said sternly. 'Begone! Follow your sword! But spare the next man you conquer.'

He stared at me, fingering his dagger as if he did not understand, or as if in the bitterness of his shame at being so defeated even life were unwelcome. I was about to repeat my words when a heavy hand fell on my shoulder.

'Fool!' a harsh growling voice muttered in my ear. 'Do you want him to serve you as Achon served Matas? This is the way to deal with him.'

And before I knew who spoke or what to expect a man vaulted over the table beside me. Seizing the Italian by the neck and waist, he flung him bodily—without paying the least regard to his dagger—into the crowd. 'There!' the new-comer cried, stretching his arms as if the effort had relieved him, 'so much for him! And do you breathe yourself. Breathe yourself, my friend,' he continued with a vain-glorious air of generosity. 'When you are rested and ready, you and I will have a bout. Mon dieu! what a thing it is to see a man! And by my faith you are a man!'

'But, sir,' I said, staring at him in the utmost bewilderment, 'we have no quarrel.'

'Quarrel?' he cried in his loud, ringing voice. 'Heaven forbid! Why should we? I love a man, however, and when I see one I say to him, "I am Crillon! Fight me!" But I see you are not yet rested. Patience! There is no hurry. Berthon de Crillon is proud to wait your convenience. In the meantime, gentlemen,' he continued, turning with a grand air to the spectators, who viewed this sudden *bouleversement* with unbounded surprise, 'let us do what we can. Take the word from me, and cry all, "*Vive le Roi, et vive l'Inconnu!*"'

Like people awaking from a dream—so great was their astonishment—the company complied and with the utmost heartiness. When the shout died away, someone cried in turn, 'Vive Crillon!' and this was honoured with a fervour which brought the tears to the eyes of that remarkable man, in whom bombast was so strangely combined with the firmest and most reckless courage. He bowed again and again, turning himself about in the small space between the tables, while his face shone with pleasure and enthusiasm. Meanwhile I viewed him with perplexity. I comprehended that it was his voice I had heard behind the settle; but I had neither the desire to fight him nor so great a reserve of strength after my illness as to be able to enter on a fresh contest with equanimity. When he turned to me, therefore, and again asked, 'Well,

sir, are you ready?' I could think of no better answer than that I had already made to him, 'But, sir, I have no quarrel with you.'

'Tut, tut!' he answered querulously, 'if that is all, let us engage.'

'That is not all, however,' I said, resolutely putting up my sword. 'I have not only no quarrel with M. de Crillon, but I received at his hands when I last saw him a considerable service.'

'Then now is the time to return it,' he answered briskly, and as if that settled the matter.

I could not refrain from laughing. 'Nay, but I have still an excuse,' I said. 'I am barely recovered from an illness, and am weak. Even so, I should be loth to decline a combat with some; but a better man than I may give the wall to M. de Crillon and suffer no disgrace.'

'Oh, if you put it that way—enough said,' he answered in a tone of disappointment. 'And, to be sure, the light is almost gone. That is a comfort. But you will not refuse to drink a cup of wine with me? Your voice I remember, though I cannot say who you are or what service I did you. For the future, however, count on me. I love a man who is brave as well as modest, and know no better friend than a stout swordsman.'

I was answering him in fitting terms—while the fickle crowd, which a few minutes earlier had been ready to tear me, viewed us from a distance with respectful homage—when the masked gentleman who had before been in his company drew near and saluted me with much stateliness.

'I congratulate you, sir,' he said, in the easy tone of a great man condescending. 'You use the sword as few use it, and fight with your head as well as your hands. Should you need a friend or employment, you will honour me by remembering that you are known to the Vicomte de Turenne.'

I bowed low to hide the start which the mention of his name caused me. For had I tried, ay, and possessed to aid me all the wit of M. de Brantôme, I could have imagined

nothing more fantastic than this meeting; or more entertaining than that I, masked, should talk with the Vicomte de Turenne masked, and hear in place of reproaches and threats of vengeance a civil offer of protection. Scarcely knowing whether I should laugh or tremble, or which should occupy me more, the diverting thing that had happened or the peril we had barely escaped, I made shift to answer him, craving his indulgence if I still preserved my incognito. Even while I spoke a fresh fear assailed me: lest M. de Crillon, recognising my voice or figure, should cry my name on the spot, and explode in a moment the mine on which we stood.

This rendered me extremely impatient to be gone. But M. le Vicomte had still something to say, and I could not withdraw myself without rudeness.

'You are travelling north like everyone else?' he said, gazing at me curiously. 'May I ask whether you are for Meudon, where the King of Navarre lies, or for the Court at St. Cloud?'

I muttered, moving restlessly under his keen eyes, that I was for Meudon.

'Then, if you care to travel with a larger company,' he rejoined, bowing with negligent courtesy, 'pray command me. I am for Meudon also, and shall leave here three hours before noon.'

Fortunately he took my assent to his gracious invitation for granted, and turned away before I had well begun to thank him. From Crillon I found it more difficult to escape. He apppeared to have conceived a great fancy for me, and felt also, I imagine, some curiosity as to my identity. But I did even this at last, and, evading the obsequious offers which were made me on all sides, escaped to the stables, where I sought out the Cid's stall, and lying down in the straw beside him, began to review the past, and plan the future. Under cover of the darkness sleep soon came to me; my last waking thoughts being divided between thankfulness for my escape and a steady purpose

to reach Meudon before the Vicomte, so that I might make good my tale in his absence. For that seemed to be my only chance of evading the dangers I had chosen to encounter.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AT MEUDON.

MAKING so early a start from Etampes that the inn, which had continued in an uproar till long after midnight, lay sunk in sleep when we rode out of the yard, we reached Meudon about noon next day. I should be tedious were I to detail what thoughts my mistress and I had during that day's journey—the last, it might be, which we should take together; or what assurances we gave one another, or how often we repented the impatience which had impelled us to put all to the touch. Madame, with kindly forethought, detached herself from us, and rode the greater part of the distance with Fanchette; but the opportunities she gave us went for little; for, to be plain, the separation we dreaded seemed to overshadow us already. We uttered few words, though those few were to the purpose, but riding hand-in-hand, with full hearts, and eyes which seldom quitted one another, looked forward to Meudon and its perils with such gloomy forebodings as our love and my precarious position suggested.

Long before we reached the town, or could see more of it than the Château, over which the Lilies of France and the broad white banner of the Bourbons floated in company, we found ourselves swept into the whirlpool which surrounds an army. Crowds stood at all the cross-roads, wagons and sumpter-mules encumbered the bridges; each moment a horseman passed us at a gallop, or a troop of disorderly rogues, soldiers only in name, reeled, shouting and singing, along the road. Here and there, for a warn-

ing to the latter sort, a man dangled on a rude gallows; under which sportsmen returning from the chase and ladies who had been for an airing rode laughing on their way.

Amid the multitude entering the town we passed unnoticed. A little way within the walls we halted to inquire where the Princess of Navarre had her lodging. Hearing that she occupied a house in the town, while her brother had his quarters in the Château, and the King of France at St. Cloud, I stayed my party in a by-road, a hundred paces farther on, and, springing from the Cid, went to my mistress's knee.

'Mademoiselle,' I said formally, and so loudly that all my men might hear, 'the time is come. I dare not go farther with you. I beg you, therefore, to bear me witness that as I took you so I have brought you back, and both with your good-will. I beg that you will give me this quittance, for it may serve me.'

She bowed her head and laid her ungloved hand on mine, which I had placed on the pommel of her saddle. 'Sir,' she answered in a broken voice, 'I will not give you this quittance, nor any quittance from me while I live.' With that she took off her mask before them all, and I saw the tears running down her white face. 'May God protect you, M. de Marsac,' she continued, stooping until her face almost touched mine, 'and bring you to the thing you desire. If not, sir, and you pay too dearly for what you have done for me, I will live a maiden all my days. And, if I do not, these men may shame me!'

My heart was too full for words, but I took the glove she held out to me, and kissed her hand with my knee bent. Then I waved—for I could not speak—to madame to proceed; and with Simon Fleix and Maignan's men to guard them they went on their way. Mademoiselle's white face looked back to me until a bend in the road hid them, and I saw them no more.

I turned when all were gone, and going heavily to where my Sard stood with his head drooping, I climbed to the

saddle, and rode at a foot-pace towards the Château. The way was short and easy, for the next turning showed me the open gateway and a crowd about it. A vast number of people were entering and leaving, while others rested in the shade of the wall, and a dozen grooms led horses up and down. The sunshine fell hotly on the road and the court-yard, and flashed back by the cuirasses of the men on guard, seized the eye and dazzled it with gleams of infinite brightness. I was advancing alone, gazing at all this with a species of dull indifference which masked for the moment the suspense I felt at heart, when a man, coming on foot along the street, crossed quickly to me and looked me in the face.

I returned his look, and seeing he was a stranger to me, was for passing on without pausing. But he wheeled beside me and uttered my name in a low voice.

I checked the Cid and looked down at him. 'Yes,' I said mechanically, 'I am M. de Marsac. But I do not know you.'

'Nevertheless I have been watching for you for three days,' he replied. 'M. de Rosny received your message. This is for you.'

He handed me a scrap of paper. 'From whom?' I asked.

'Maignan,' he answered briefly. And with that, and a stealthy look round, he left me, and went the way he had been going before.

I tore open the note, and knowing that Maignan could not write, was not surprised to find that it lacked any signature. The brevity of its contents vied with the curtness of its bearer. 'In Heaven's name go back and wait,' it ran. 'Your enemy is here, and those who wish you well are powerless.'

A warning so explicit, and delivered under such circumstances, might have been expected to make me pause even then. But I read the message with the same dull indifference, the same dogged resolve with which the sight of the crowded gateway before me had inspired me. I had not

come so far and baffled Turenne by an hour to fail in my purpose at the last; nor given such pledges to another to prove false to myself. Moreover, the distant rattle of musketry, which went to show that a skirmish was taking place on the farther side of the Castle, seemed an invitation to me to proceed; for now, if ever, my sword might earn protection and a pardon. Only in regard to M. de Rosny, from whom I had no doubt that the message came, I resolved to act with prudence; neither making any appeal to him in public nor mentioning his name to others in private.

The Cid had borne me by this time into the middle of the throng about the gateway, who, wondering to see a stranger of my appearance arrive without attendants, eyed me with a mixture of civility and forwardness. I recognised more than one man whom I had seen about the Court at St. Jean d'Angely six months before; but so great is the disguising power of handsome clothes and equipments that none of these knew me. I beckoned to the nearest, and asked him if the King of Navarre was in the Château.

'He has gone to see the King of France at St. Cloud,' the man answered, with something of wonder that anyone should be ignorant of so important a fact. 'He is expected here in an hour.'

I thanked him, and calculating that I should still have time and to spare before the arrival of M. de Turenne, I dismounted, and taking the rein over my arm, began to walk up and down in the shade of the wall. Meanwhile the loiterers increased in numbers as the minutes passed. Men of better standing rode up, and, leaving their horses in charge of their lackeys, went into the Château. Officers in shining corslets, or with boots and scabbards dulled with dust, arrived and clattered in through the gates. A messenger galloped up with letters, and was instantly surrounded by a curious throng of questioners; who left him only to gather about the next comers, a knot of townsfolk, whose downcast visages and glances of apprehension seemed to betoken no pleasant or easy mission.

Watching many of these enter and disappear, while only the humbler sort remained to swell the crowd at the gate, I began to experience the discomfort and impatience which are the lot of the man who finds himself placed in a false position. I foresaw with clearness the injury I was about to do my cause by presenting myself to the king among the common herd; and yet I had no choice save to do this, for I dared not run the risk of entering, lest I should be required to give my name, and fail to see the King of Navarre at all.

As it was I came very near to being foiled in this way; for I presently recognised, and was recognised in turn, by a gentleman who rode up to the gates and, throwing his reins to a groom, dismounted with an air of immense gravity. This was M. Forget, the king's secretary, and the person to whom I had on a former occasion presented a petition. He looked at me with eyes of profound astonishment, and saluting me stiffly from a distance, seemed in two minds whether he should pass in or speak to me. On second thoughts, however, he came towards me, and again saluted me with a peculiarly dry and austere aspect.

'I believe, sir, I am speaking to M. de Marsac?' he said in a low voice, but not impolitely.

I replied in the affirmative.

'And that, I conclude, is your horse?' he continued, raising his cane, and pointing to the Cid, which I had fastened to a hook in the wall.

I replied again in the affirmative.

'Then take a word of advice,' he answered, screwing up his features, and speaking in a dry sort of way. 'Get upon its back without an instant's delay, and put as many leagues between yourself and Meudon as horse and man may.'

'I am obliged to you,' I said, though I was greatly startled by his words. 'And what if I do not take your advice?'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'In that case look to yourself!' he retorted. 'But you will look in vain!'

He turned on his heel as he spoke, and in a moment was gone. I watched him enter the Château, and in the uncertainty which possessed me whether he was not gone—after salving his conscience by giving me warning—to order my instant arrest, I felt, and I doubt not I looked, as ill at ease for the time being as the group of trembling townsfolk who stood near me. Reflecting that he should know his master's mind, I recalled with depressing clearness the repeated warnings the King of Navarre had given me that I must not look to him for reward or protection. I bethought me that I was here against his express orders: presuming on those very services which he had given me notice he should repudiate. I remembered that Rosny had always been in the same tale. And in fine I began to see that mademoiselle and I had together decided on a step which I should never have presumed to take on my own motion.

I had barely arrived at this conclusion when the trampling of hoofs and a sudden closing in of the crowd round the gate announced the King of Navarre's approach. With a sick heart I drew nearer, feeling that the crisis was at hand; and in a moment he came in sight, riding beside an elderly man, plainly dressed and mounted, with whom he was carrying on an earnest conversation. A train of nobles and gentlemen, whose martial air and equipments made up for the absence of the gewgaws and glitter, to which my eyes had become accustomed at Blois, followed close on his heels. Henry himself wore a suit of white velvet, frayed in places and soiled by his armour; but his quick eye and eager, almost fierce, countenance could not fail to win and keep the attention of the least observant. He kept glancing from side to side as he came on; and that with so cheerful an air and a carriage so full at once of dignity and good-humour that no one could look on him and fail to see that here was a leader and a prince of men, temperate in victory and unsurpassed in defeat.

The crowd raising a cry of '*Vive Navarre!*' as he drew

near, he bowed, with a sparkle in his eye. But when a few by the gate cried '*Vivent les Rois!*' he held up his hand for silence, and said in a loud, clear voice, 'Not that, my friends. There is but one king in France. Let us say instead, "Vive le Roi!"'

The spokesman of the little group of townsfolk, who, I learned, were from Arcueil, and had come to complain of the excessive number of troops quartered upon them, took advantage of the pause to approach him. Henry received the old man with a kindly look, and bent from his saddle to hear what he had to say. While they were talking I pressed forward, the emotion I felt on my own account heightened by my recognition of the man who rode by the King of Navarre—who was no other than M. de la Noüe. No Huguenot worthy of the name could look on the veteran who had done and suffered more for the cause than any living man without catching something of his stern enthusiasm; and the sight, while it shamed me, who a moment before had been inclined to prefer my safety to the assistance I owed my country, gave me courage to step to the king's rein, so that I heard his last words to the men of Arcueil.

'Patience, my friends,' he said kindly. 'The burden is heavy, but the journey is a short one. The Seine is ours; the circle is complete. In a week Paris must surrender. The king, my cousin, will enter, and you will be rid of us. For France's sake one week, my friends.'

The men fell back with low obeisances, charmed by his good-nature, and Henry, looking up, saw me before him. On the instant his jaw fell. His brow, suddenly contracting above eyes, which flashed with surprise and displeasure, altered in a moment the whole aspect of his face; which grew dark and stern as night. His first impulse was to pass by me; but seeing that I held my ground, he hesitated, so completely chagrined by my appearance that he did not know how to act, or in what way to deal with me. I seized the occasion, and bending my knee with as much respect

as I had ever used to the King of France, begged to bring myself to his notice, and to crave his protection and favour.

'This is no time to trouble me, sir,' he retorted, eyeing me with an angry side-glance. 'I do not know you. You are unknown to me, sir. You must go to M. de Rosny.'

'It would be useless sire,' I answered, in desperate persistence.

'Then I can do nothing for you,' he rejoined peevishly. 'Stand on one side, sir.'

But I was desperate. I knew that I had risked all on the event, and must establish my footing before M. de Turenne's return, or run the risk of certain recognition and vengeance. I cried out, caring nothing who heard, that I was M. de Marsac, that I had come back to meet whatever my enemies could allege against me.

'*Ventre Saint Gris!*' Henry exclaimed, starting in his saddle with well-feigned surprise. 'Are you that man?'

'I am, sire,' I answered.

'Then you must be mad!' he retorted, appealing to those behind him. 'Stark, staring mad to show your face here! *Ventre Saint Gris!* Are we to have all the ravishers and plunderers in the country come to us?'

'I am neither the one nor the other!' I answered, looking with indignation from him to the gaping train behind him.

'That you will have to settle with M. de Turenne!' he retorted, frowning down at me with his whole face turned gloomy and fierce. 'I know you well, sir, now. Complaint has been made that you abducted a lady from his Castle of Chizé some time back.'

'The lady, sire, is now in charge of the Princess of Navarre.'

'She is?' he exclaimed, quite taken aback.

'And if she has aught of complaint against me,' I continued with pride, 'I will submit to whatever punishment you order or M. de Turenne demands. But if she has no complaint to make, and vows that she accompanied me of

her own free-will and accord, and has suffered neither wrong nor displeasure at my hands, then, sire, I claim that this is a private matter between myself and M. de Turenne.'

'Even so I think you will have your hands full,' he answered grimly. At the same time he stopped by a gesture those who would have cried out upon me, and looked at me himself with an altered countenance. 'Do I understand that you assert that the lady went of her own accord?' he asked.

'She went and has returned, sire,' I answered.

'Strange!' he ejaculated. 'Have you married her?'

'No, sire,' I answered. 'I desire leave to do so.'

'Mon dieu! she is M. de Turenne's ward,' he rejoined, almost dumbfounded by my audacity.

'I do not despair of obtaining his assent, sire,' I said patiently.

'*Saint Gris!* the man is mad!' he cried, wheeling his horse and facing his train with a gesture of the utmost wonder. 'It is the strangest story I ever heard.'

'But somewhat more to the gentleman's credit than the lady's!' one said with a smirk and a smile.

'A lie!' I cried, springing forward on the instant with a boldness which astonished myself. 'She is as pure as your Highness's sister! I swear it. That man lies in his teeth, and I will maintain it.'

'Sir!' the King of Navarre cried, turning on me with the utmost sternness, 'you forget yourself in my presence! Silence, and beware another time how you let your tongue run on those above you. You have enough trouble, let me tell you, on your hands already.'

'Yet the man lies!' I answered doggedly, remembering Crillon and his ways. 'And if he will do me the honour of stepping aside with me, I will convince him of it!'

'*Ventre Saint Gris!*' Henry replied, frowning, and dwelling on each syllable of his favourite oath. 'Will you be silent, sir, and let me think? Or must I order your instant arrest?'

'Surely that at least, sire,' a suave voice interjected. And with that a gentleman pressed forward from the rest, and gaining a place of 'vantage by the King's side, shot at me a look of extreme malevolence. 'My lord of Turenne will expect no less at your Highness's hands,' he continued warmly. 'I beg you will give the order on the spot, and hold this person to answer for his misdeeds. M. de Turenne returns to-day. He should be here now. I say again, sire, he will expect no less than this.'

The king, gazing at me with gloomy eyes, tugged at his moustaches. Someone had motioned the common herd to stand back out of hearing; at the same time the suite had moved up out of curiosity and formed a half-circle; in the midst of which I stood fronting the king, who had La Noüe and the last speaker on either hand. Perplexity and annoyance struggled for the mastery in his face as he looked darkly down at me, his teeth showing through his beard. Profoundly angered by my appearance, which he had taken at first to be the prelude to disclosures which must detach Turenne at a time when union was all-important, he had now ceased to fear for himself; and perhaps saw something in the attitude I adopted which appealed to his nature and sympathies.

'If the girl is really back,' he said at last, 'M. d'Aremburg, I do not see any reason why I should interfere. At present, at any rate.

'I think, sire, M. de Turenne will see reason,' the gentleman answered drily.

The king coloured. 'M. de Turenne,' he began,

'Has made many sacrifices at your request, sire,' the other said with meaning. 'And buried some wrongs, or fancied wrongs, in connection with this very matter. This person has outraged him in the grossest manner, and in M. le Vicomte's name I ask, nay I press upon you, that he be instantly arrested, and held to answer for it.'

'I am ready to answer for it now!' I retorted, looking from face to face for sympathy, and finding none save in M.

de la Noüe's, who appeared to regard me with grave approbation. 'To the Vicomte de Turenne, or the person he may appoint to represent him.'

'Enough!' Henry said, raising his hand and speaking in the tone of authority he knew so well how to adopt. 'For you, M. d'Aremburg, I thank you. Turenne is happy in his friend. But this gentleman came to me of his own free will and I do not think it consistent with my honour to detain him without warning given. I grant him an hour to remove himself from my neighbourhood. If he be found after that time has elapsed,' he continued solemnly, 'his fate be on his own head. Gentlemen, we are late already. Let us on.'

I looked at him as he pronounced this sentence, and strove to find words in which to make a final appeal to him. But no words came; and when he bade me stand aside, I did so mechanically, remaining with my head bared to the sunshine while the troop rode by. Some looked back at me with curiosity, as at a man of whom they had heard a tale, and some with a jeer on their lips; a few with dark looks of menace. When they were all gone, and the servants who followed them had disappeared also, and I was left to the inquisitive glances of the rabble who stood gaping after the sight, I turned and went to the Cid, and loosed the horse with a feeling of bitter disappointment.

The plan which mademoiselle had proposed and I had adopted in the forest by St. Gaultier—when it seemed to us that our long absence and the great events of which we heard must have changed the world and opened a path for our return—had failed utterly. Things were as they had been; the strong were still strong, and friendship under bond to fear. Plainly we should have shewn ourselves wiser had we taken the lowlier course, and, obeying the warnings given us, waited the King of Navarre's pleasure or the tardy recollection of Rosny. I had not then stood, as I now stood, in instant jeopardy, nor felt the keen pangs of a separation which

bade fair to be lasting. She was safe, and that was much; but I, after long service and brief happiness, must go out again alone, with only memories to comfort me.

It was Simon Fleix's voice which awakened me from this unworthy lethargy—as selfish as it was useless—and, recalling me to myself, reminded me that precious time was passing while I stood inactive. To get at me he had forced his way through the curious crowd, and his face was flushed. He plucked me by the sleeve, regarding the varlets round him with a mixture of anger and fear.

'Nom de Dieu! do they take you for a rope-dancer?' he muttered in my ear. 'Mount, sir, and come. There is not a moment to be lost.'

'You left her at Madame Catherine's?' I said.

'To be sure,' he answered impatiently. 'Trouble not about her. Save yourself, M. de Marsac. That is the thing to be done now.'

I mounted mechanically, and felt my courage return as the horse moved under me. I trotted through the crowd, and without thought took the road by which we had come. When we had ridden a hundred yards, however, I pulled up. 'An hour is a short start,' I said sullenly. 'Whither?'

'To St. Cloud,' he answered promptly. 'The protection of the King of France may avail for a day or two. After that, there will still be the League, if Paris have not fallen.'

I saw there was nothing else for it, and assented, and we set off. The distance which separates Meudon from St. Cloud we might have ridden under the hour, but the direct road runs across the Scholars' Meadow, a wide plain north of Meudon. This lay exposed to the enemy's fire, and was, besides, the scene of hourly conflicts between the horse of both parties, so that to cross it without an adequate force was impossible. Driven to make a circuit, we took longer to reach our destination, yet did so without mishap; finding the little town, when we came in sight of it, given up to all the bustle and commotion which properly belong to the Court and camp.

It was, indeed, as full as it could be, for the surrender of Paris being momentarily expected, St. Cloud had become the rendezvous as well of the few who had long followed a principle as of the many who wait upon success. The streets, crowded in every part, shone with glancing colours, with steel and velvet, the garb of fashion and the plumes of war. Long lines of flags obscured the eaves and broke the sunshine, while, above all, the bells of half a dozen churches rang merry answer to the distant crash of guns. Everywhere on flag and arch and streamer I read the motto, 'Vive le Roi!'—words written, God knew then, and we know now, in what a mockery of doom!

CHAPTER XXXII

'TIS AN ILL WIND.'

We had made our way slowly and with much jostling as far as the principal street, finding the press increase as we advanced, when I heard, as I turned a corner, my name called, and, looking up, saw at a window the face of which I was in search. After that half a minute sufficed to bring M. d'Agen flying to my side, when nothing, as I had expected, would do but I must dismount where I was and share his lodging. He made no secret of his joy and surprise at sight of me, but pausing only to tell Simon where the stable was, haled me through the crowd and up his stairs with a fervour and heartiness which brought the tears to my eyes, and served to impress the company whom I found above with a more than sufficient sense of my importance.

Seeing him again in the highest feather and in the full employment of all those little arts and graces which served as a foil to his real worth, I took it as a great honour that he laid them aside for the nonce; and introduced me to the seat of honour and made me known to his companions with

a boyish directness and a simple thought for my comfort which infinitely pleased me. He bade his landlord, without a moment's delay, bring wine and meat and everything which could refresh a traveller, and was himself up and down a hundred times in a minute, calling to his servants for this or that, or railing at them for their failure to bring me a score of things I did not need. I hastened to make my excuses to the company for interrupting them in the midst of their talk; and these they were kind enough to accept in good part. At the same time, reading clearly in M. d'Agen's excited face and shining eyes that he longed to be alone with me, they took the hint, and presently left us together.

'Well,' he said, coming back from the door, to which he had conducted them, 'what have you to tell me, my friend? She is not with you?'

'She is with Mademoiselle de la Vire at Meudon,' I answered, smiling. 'And for the rest, she is well and in better spirits.'

'She sent me some message?' he asked.

I shook my head. 'She did not know I should see you,' I answered.

'But she—she has spoken of me lately?' he continued, his face falling.

'I do not think she has named your name for a fortnight,' I answered, laughing. 'There's for you! Why, man,' I continued, adopting a different tone, and laying my hand on his shoulder in a manner which reassured him at least as much as my words, 'are you so young a lover as to be ignorant that a woman says least of that of which she thinks most? Pluck up courage! Unless I am mistaken, you have little to be afraid of except the past. Only have patience.'

'You think so?' he said gratefully.

I assured him that I had no doubt of it; and on that he fell into a reverie, and I to watching him. Alas for the littleness of our natures! He had received me with open arms, yet at sight of the happiness which took possession of

his handsome face I gave way to the pettiest feeling which can harbour in a man's breast. I looked at him with eyes of envy, bitterly comparing my lot with that which fate had reserved for him. He had fortune, good looks, and success on his side, great relations, and high hopes; I stood in instant jeopardy, my future dark, and every path which presented itself so hazardous that I knew not which to adopt. He was young, and I past my prime; he in favour, and I a fugitive.

To such reflections he put an end in a way which made me blush for my churlishness. For, suddenly awaking out of his pleasant dream, he asked me about myself and my fortunes, inquiring eagerly how I came to be in St. Cloud, and listening to the story of my adventures with a generous anxiety which endeared him to me more and more. When I had done—and by that time Simon had joined us, and was waiting at the lower end of the room—he pronounced that I must see the king.

'There is nothing else for it,' he said.

'I have come to see him,' I answered.

'Mon dieu, yes!' he continued, rising from his seat and looking at me with a face of concern. 'No one else can help you.'

I nodded.

'Turenne has four thousand men here. You can do nothing against so many?'

'Nothing,' I said. 'The question is, Will the king protect me?'

'It is he or no one,' M. d'Agen answered warmly. 'You cannot see him to-night: he has a Council. To-morrow at daybreak you may. You must lie here to-night, and I will set my fellows to watch, and I think you will be safe. I will away now and see if my uncle will help. Can you think of anyone else who would speak for you?'

I considered, and was about to answer in the negative, when Simon, who had listened with a scared face, suggested M. de Crillon.

'Yes, if he would,' M. d'Agen exclaimed, looking at the lad with approbation. 'He has weight with the king.'

'I think he might,' I replied slowly. 'I had a curious encounter with him last night.' And with that I told M. d'Agen of the duel I fought at the inn.

'Good!' he said, his eyes sparkling. 'I wish I had been there to see. At any rate we will try him. Crillon fears no one, not even the king.'

So it was settled. For that night I was to keep close in my friend's lodging, showing not even my nose at the window.

When he had gone on his errand, and I found myself alone in the room, I am fain to confess that I fell very low in my spirits. M. d'Agen's travelling equipment lay about the apartment, but failed to give any but an untidy air to its roomy bareness. The light was beginning to wane, the sun was gone. Outside, the ringing of bells and the distant muttering of guns, with the tumult of sounds which rose from the crowded street, seemed to tell of joyous life and freedom, and all the hopes and ambitions from which I was cut off.

Having no other employment, I watched the street, and keeping myself well retired from the window, saw knots of gay riders pass this way and that through the crowd, their corslets shining and their voices high. Monks and ladies, a cardinal and an ambassador, passed under my eyes—these and an endless procession of townsmen and beggars, soldiers and courtiers, Gascons, Normans and Picards. Never had I seen such a sight or so many people gathered together. It seemed as if half Paris had come out to make submission, so that while my gorge rose against my own imprisonment, the sight gradually diverted my mind from my private distresses, by bidding me find compensation for them in the speedy and glorious triumph of the cause.

Even when the light failed the pageant did not cease, but, torches and lanthorns springing into life, turned night into day. From every side came sounds of revelry or strife. The

crowd continued to perambulate the streets until a late hour, with cries of '*Vive le Roi!*' and '*Vive Navarre!*' while now and again the passage of a great noble with his suite called forth a fresh outburst of enthusiasm. Nothing seemed more certain, more inevitable, more clearly predestinated than that twenty-four hours must see the fall of Paris.

Yet Paris did not fall.

When M. d'Agen returned a little before midnight, he found me still sitting in the dark looking from the window. I heard him call roughly for lights, and apprised by the sound of his voice that something was wrong, I rose to meet him. He stood silent awhile, twirling his small moustaches, and then broke into a passionate tirade, from which I was not slow to gather that M. de Rambouillet declined to serve me.

'Well,' I said, feeling for the young man's distress and embarrassment, 'perhaps he is right.'

'He says that word respecting you came this evening, my friend answered, his cheeks red with shame, 'and that to countenance you after that would only be to court certain humiliation. I did not let him off too easily, I assure you,' M. d'Agen continued, turning away to evade my gaze; 'but I got no satisfaction. He said you had his good-will, and that to help you he would risk something, but that to do so under these circumstances would be only to injure himself.'

'There is still Crillon,' I said, with as much cheerfulness as I could assume. 'Pray Heaven he be there early! Did M. de Rambouillet say anything else?'

'That your only chance was to fly as quickly and secretly as possible.'

'He thought my situation desperate, then?'

My friend nodded; and scarcely less depressed on my account than ashamed on his own, evinced so much feeling that it was all I could do to comfort him; which I succeeded in doing only when I diverted the conversation to Madame de Bruhl. We passed the short night together, sharing the

same room and the same bed, and talking more than we slept—of madame and mademoiselle, the castle on the hill, and the camp in the woods, of all old days in fine, but little of the future. Soon after dawn Simon, who lay on a pallet across the threshold, roused me from a fitful sleep into which I had just fallen, and a few minutes later I stood up dressed and armed, ready to try the last chance left to me.

M. d'Agen had dressed stage for stage with me, and I had kept silence. But when he took up his cap, and showed clearly that he had it in his mind to go with me, I withstood him. 'No,' I said, 'you can do me little good, and may do yourself much harm.'

'You shall not go without one friend,' he cried fiercely.

'Tut, tut!' I said. 'I shall have Simon.'

But Simon, when I turned to speak to him, was gone. Few men are at their bravest in the early hours of the day, and it did not surprise me that the lad's courage had failed him. The defection only strengthened, however, the resolution I had formed that I would not injure M. d'Agen; though it was some time before I could persuade him that I was in earnest, and would go alone or not at all. In the end he had to content himself with lending me his back and breast, which I gladly put on, thinking it likely enough that I might be set upon before I reached the castle. And then, the time being about seven, I parted from him with many embraces and kindly words, and went into the street with my sword under my cloak.

The town, late in rising after its orgy, lay very still and quiet. The morning was grey and warm, with a cloudy sky. The flags, which had made so gay a show yesterday, hung close to the poles, or flapped idly and fell dead again. I walked slowly along beneath them, keeping a sharp look-out on every side; but there were few persons moving in the streets, and I reached the Castle gates without misadventure. Here was something of life; a bustle of officers and soldiers passing in and out, of courtiers whose office made their presence necessary, of beggars who had flocked hither

in the night for company. In the middle of these I recognised on a sudden and with great surprise Simon Fleix walking my horse up and down. On seeing me he handed it to a boy, and came up to speak to me with a red face, muttering that four legs were better than two. I did not say much to him, my heart being full and my thoughts occupied with the presence chamber and what I should say there; but I nodded kindly to him, and he fell in behind me as the sentries challenged me. I answered them that I sought M. de Crillon, and so getting by, fell into the rear of a party of three who seemed bent on the same errand as myself.

One of these was a Jacobin monk, whose black and white robes, by reminding me of Father Antoine, sent a chill to my heart. The second, whose eye I avoided, I knew to be M. la Guesle, the king's Solicitor-General. The third was a stranger to me. Enabled by M. la Guesle's presence to pass the main guards without challenge, the party proceeded through a maze of passages and corridors, conversing together in a low tone; while I, keeping in their train with my face cunningly muffled, got as far by this means as the ante-chamber, which I found almost empty. Here I inquired of the usher for M. de Crillon, and learned with the utmost consternation that he was not present.

This blow, which almost stunned me, opened my eyes to the precarious nature of my position, which only the early hour and small attendance rendered possible for a moment. At any minute I might be recognised and questioned, or my name be required; while the guarded doors of the chamber shut me off as effectually from the king's face and grace as though I were in Paris, or a hundred leagues away. Endeavouring to the best of my power to conceal the chagrin and alarm which possessed me as this conviction took hold of me, I walked to the window; and to hide my face more completely and at the same time gain a moment to collect my thoughts, affected to be engaged in looking through it.

Nothing which passed in the room, however, escaped me. I marked everything and everyone, though all my thought

was how I might get to the king. The barber came out of the chamber with a silver basin, and stood a moment, and went in again with an air of vast importance. The guards yawned, and an officer entered, looked round, and retired. M. la Guesle, who had gone in to the presence, came out again and stood near me talking with the Jacobin, whose pale nervous face and hasty movements reminded me somehow of Simon Fleix. The monk held a letter or petition in his hand, and appeared to be getting it by heart, for his lips moved continually. The light which fell on his face from the window showed it to be of a peculiar sweaty pallor, and distorted besides. But supposing him to be devoted, like many of his kind, to an unwholesome life, I thought nothing of this; though I liked him little, and would have shifted my place but for the convenience of his neighbourhood.

Presently, while I was cudgelling my brains, a person came out and spoke to La Guesle; who called in his turn to the monk, and started hastily towards the door. The Jacobin followed. The third person who had entered in their company had his attention directed elsewhere at the moment; and though La Guesle called to him, took no heed. On the instant I grasped the situation. Taking my courage in my hands, I crossed the floor behind the monk; who, hearing me, or feeling his robe come in contact with me, presently started and looked round suspiciously, his face wearing a scowl so black and ugly that I almost recoiled from him, dreaming for a moment that I saw before me the very spirit of Father Antoine. But as the man said nothing, and the next instant averted his gaze, I hardened my heart and pushed on behind him, and passing the usher, found myself as by magic in the presence which had seemed a while ago as unattainable by my wits as it was necessary to my safety.

It was not this success alone, however, which caused my heart to beat more hopefully. The king was speaking as I entered, and the gay tones of his voice seemed to promise a favourable reception. His Majesty sat half-dressed on a

stool at the farther end of the apartment, surrounded by five or six noblemen, while as many attendants, among whom I hastened to mingle, waited near the door.

La Guesle made as if he would advance, and then, seeing the king's attention was not on him, held back. But in a moment the king saw him and called to him. 'Ha, Guesle!' he said with good-temper, 'is it you? Is your friend with you?'

The Solicitor went forward with the monk at his elbow, and I had leisure to remark the favourable change which had taken place in the king, who spoke more strongly and seemed in better health than of old. His face looked less cadaverous under the paint, his form a trifle less emaciated. That which struck me more than anything, however, was the improvement in his spirits. His eyes sparkled from time to time, and he laughed continually, so that I could scarcely believe that he was the same man whom I had seen overwhelmed with despair and tortured by his conscience.

Letting his attention slip from La Guesle, he began to bandy words with the nobleman who stood nearest to him; looking up at him with a roguish eye, and making bets on the fall of Paris.

'Morbleu!' I heard him cry gaily, 'I would give a thousand pounds to see the Montpensier this morning! She may keep her third crown for herself. Or, *peste!* we might put her in a convent. That would be a fine vengeance!'

'The veil for the tonsure,' the nobleman said with a smirk.

'Ay. Why not? She would have made a monk of me,' the king rejoined smartly. 'She must be ready to hang herself with her garters this morning, if she is not dead of spite already. Or, stay, I had forgotten her golden scissors. Let her open a vein with them. Well, what does your friend want, La Guesle?'

I did not hear the answer, but it was apparently satisfactory, for in a minute all except the Jacobin fell back, leaving the monk standing before the king; who, stretching

out his hand, took from him a letter. The Jacobin, trembling visibly, seemed scarcely able to support the honour done him, and the king, seeing this, said in a voice audible to all, 'Stand up, man. You are welcome. I love a cowl as some love a lady's hood. And now, what is this?'

He read a part of the letter and rose. As he did so the monk leaned forward as though to receive the paper back again, and then so swiftly, so suddenly, with so unexpected a movement that no one stirred until all was over, struck the king in the body with a knife! As the blade flashed and was hidden, and His Majesty with a deep sob fell back on the stool, then, and not till then, I knew that I had missed a providential chance of earning pardon and protection. For had I only marked the Jacobin as we passed the door together, and read his evil face aright, a word, one word, had done for me more than the pleading of a score of Crillons!

Too late a dozen sprang forward to the king's assistance; but before they reached him he had himself drawn the knife from the wound and struck the assassin with it on the head. While some, with cries of grief, ran to support Henry, from whose body the blood was already flowing fast, others seized and struck down the wretched monk. As they gathered round him I saw him raise himself for a moment on his knees and look upward; the blood which ran down his face, no less than the mingled triumph and horror of his features, impressed the sight on my recollection. The next instant three swords were plunged into his breast, and his writhing body, plucked up from the floor amid a transport of curses, was forced headlong through the casement and flung down to make sport for the grooms and scullions who stood below.

A scene of indescribable confusion followed, some crying that the king was dead, while others called for a doctor, and some by name for Dortoman. I expected to see the doors closed and all within secured, that if the man had confederates they might be taken. But there was no one to give the

order. Instead, many who had neither the *entrée* nor any business in the chamber forced their way in, and by their cries and pressure rendered the hub-bub and tumult a hundred times worse. In the midst of this, while I stood stunned and dumbfounded, my own risks and concerns forgotten, I felt my sleeve furiously plucked, and, looking round, found Simon at my elbow. The lad's face was crimson, his eyes seemed starting from his head.

'Come,' he muttered, seizing my arm. 'Come!' And without further ceremony or explanation he dragged me towards the door, while his face and manner evinced as much heat and impatience as if he had been himself the assassin. 'Come, there is not a moment to be lost,' he panted, continuing his exertions without the least intermission.

'Whither?' I said, in amazement, as I reluctantly permitted him to force me along the passage and through the gaping crowd on the stairs. 'Whither, man?'

'Mount and ride!' was the answer he hissed in my ear. 'Ride for your life to the King of Navarre—to the King of France it may be! Ride as you have never ridden before, and tell him the news, and bid him look to himself! Be the first, and, Heaven helping us, Turenne may do his worst!'

I felt every nerve in my body tingle as I awoke to his meaning. Without a word I left his arm, and flung myself into the crowd which filled the lower passage to suffocation. As I struggled fiercely with them Simon aided me by crying 'A doctor! a doctor! make way there!' and this induced many to give place to me under the idea that I was an accredited messenger. Eventually I succeeded in forcing my way through and reaching the courtyard; being, as it turned out, the first person to issue from the Château. A dozen people sprang towards me with anxious eyes and questions on their lips, but I ran past them and, catching the Cid, which was fortunately at hand, by the rein, bounded into the saddle.

As I turned the horse to the gate I heard Simon cry after

me, 'The Scholars' Meadow! Go that way!' and then I heard no more. I was out of the yard and galloping bare-headed down the pitched street, while women snatched their infants up and ran aside, and men came startled to the doors, crying that the League was upon us. As the good horse flung up his head and bounded forward, hurling the gravel behind him with hoofs which slid and clattered on the pavement, as the wind began to whistle by me, and I seized the reins in a shorter grip, I felt my heart bound with exultation. I experienced such a blessed relief and elation as the prisoner long fettered and confined feels when restored to the air of heaven.

Down one street and through a narrow lane we thundered, until a broken gateway stopped with fascines—through which the Cid blundered and stumbled—brought us at a bound into the Scholars' Meadow just as the tardy sun broke through the clouds and flooded the low, wide plain with brightness. Half a league in front of us the towers of Meudon rose to view on a hill. In the distance, to the left, lay the walls of Paris, and nearer, on the same side, a dozen forts and batteries; while here and there, in that quarter, a shining clump of spears or a dense mass of infantry betrayed the enemy's presence.

I heeded none of these things, however, nor anything except the towers of Meudon, setting the Cid's head straight for these and riding on at the top of his speed. Swiftly ditch and dyke came into view before us and flashed away beneath us. Men lying in pits rose up and aimed at us; or ran with cries to intercept us. A cannon-shot fired from the fort by Issy tore up the earth to one side; a knot of lancers sped from the shelter of an earthwork in the same quarter, and raced us for half a mile, with frantic shouts and threats of vengeance. But all such efforts were vanity. The Cid, fired by this sudden call upon his speed, and feeling himself loosed—rarest of events—to do his best, shook the foam from his bit, and opening his blood-red nostrils to the wind, crouched lower and lower; until his long neck,

stretched out before him, seemed, as the sward swept by, like the point of an arrow speeding resistless to its aim.

God knows, as the air rushed by me and the sun shone in my face, I cried aloud like a boy, and though I sat still and stirred neither hand nor foot, lest I should break the good Sard's stride, I prayed wildly that the horse which I had groomed with my own hands and fed with my last crown might hold on unfaltering to the end. For I dreamed that the fate of a nation rode in my saddle; and mindful alike of Simon's words, 'Bid him look to himself,' and of my own notion that the League would not be so foolish as to remove one enemy to exalt another, I thought nothing more likely than that, with all my fury, I should arrive too late, and find the King of Navarre as I had left the King of France.

In this strenuous haste I covered a mile as a mile has seldom been covered before; and I was growing under the influence of the breeze which whipped my temples somewhat more cool and hopeful, when I saw on a sudden right before me, and between me and Meudon, a handful of men engaged in a *mêlée*. There were red and white jackets in it—Leaguers and Huguenots—and the red coats seemed to be having the worst of it. Still, while I watched, they came off in order, and unfortunately in such a way and at such a speed that I saw they must meet me face to face whether I tried to avoid the encounter or not. I had barely time to take in the danger and its nearness, and discern beyond both parties the main-guard of the Huguenots, enlivened by a score of pennons, when the Leaguers were upon me.

I suppose they knew that no friend would ride for Meudon at that pace, for they dashed at me six abreast with a shout of triumph; and before I could count a score we met. The Cid was still running strongly, and I had not thought to stay him, so that I had no time to use my pistols. My sword I had out, but the sun dazzled me and the men wore corslets, and I made but poor play with it; though I struck out savagely, as we crashed together, in my rage at

this sudden crossing of my hopes when all seemed done and gained. The Cid faced them bravely—I heard the distant huzza of the Huguenots—and I put aside one point which threatened my throat. But the sun was in my eyes and something struck me on the head. Another second, and a blow in the breast forced me fairly from the saddle. Gripping furiously at the air I went down, stunned and dizzy, my last thought as I struck the ground being of mademoiselle, and the little brook with the stepping-stones.

CHAPTER XXXV.

'LE ROI EST MORT!'

It was M. d'Agen's breastpiece saved my life by warding off the point of the varlet's sword, so that the worst injury I got was the loss of my breath for five minutes, with a swimming in the head and a kind of syncope. These being past, I found myself on my back on the ground, with a man's knee on my breast and a dozen horsemen standing round me. The sky reeled dizzily before my eyes and the men's figures loomed gigantic; yet I had sense enough to know what had happened to me, and that matters might well be worse.

Resigning myself to the prospect of captivity, I prepared to ask for quarter; which I did not doubt I should receive, since they had taken me in an open skirmish, and honestly, and in the daylight. But the man whose knee already incommoded me sufficiently, seeing me about to speak, squeezed me on a sudden so fiercely, bidding me at the same time in a gruff whisper be silent, that I thought I could not do better than obey.

Accordingly I lay still, and as in a dream, for my brain was still clouded, heard someone say, 'Dead! Is he? I

hoped we had come in time. Well, he deserved a better fate. Who is he, Rosny?'

'Do you know him, Maignan?' said a voice which sounded strangely familiar.

The man who knelt upon me answered, 'No, my lord. He is a stranger to me. He has the look of a Norman.'

'Like enough!' replied a high-pitched voice I had not heard before. 'For he rode a good horse. Give me a hundred like it, and a hundred men to ride as straight, and I would not envy the King of France.'

'Much less his poor cousin of Navarre,' the first speaker rejoined in a laughing tone, 'without a whole shirt to his back or a doublet that is decently new. Come, Turenne, acknowledge that you are not so badly off after all!'

At that word the cloud which had darkened my faculties swept on a sudden aside. I saw that the men into whose hands I had fallen wore white favours, their leader a white plume; and comprehended without more that the King of Navarre had come to my rescue, and beaten off the Leaguers who had dismounted me. At the same moment the remembrance of all that had gone before, and especially of the scene I had witnessed in the king's chamber, rushed upon my mind with such overwhelming force that I fell into a fury of impatience at the thought of the time I had wasted; and rising up suddenly I threw off Maignan with all my force, crying out that I was alive—that I was alive, and had news.

The equerry did his best to restrain me, cursing me under his breath for a fool, and almost squeezing the life out of me. But in vain, for the King of Navarre, riding nearer, saw me struggling. 'Hallo! hallo! 'tis a strange dead man,' he cried, interposing. 'What is the meaning of this? Let him go! Do you hear, sirrah? Let him go!'

The equerry obeyed and stood back sullenly, and I staggered to my feet, and looked round with eyes which still swam and watered. On the instant a cry of recognition greeted me, with a hundred exclamations of astonishment.

While I heard my name uttered on every side in a dozen different tones, I remarked that M. de Rosny, upon whom my eyes first fell, alone stood silent, regarding me with a face of sorrowful surprise.

'By heavens, sir, I knew nothing of this!' I heard the King of Navarre declare, addressing himself to the Vicomte de Turenne. 'The man is here by no connivance of mine. Interrogate him yourself, if you will. Or I will. Speak, sir,' he continued, turning to me with his countenance hard and forbidding. 'You heard me yesterday, what I promised you? Why, in God's name, are you here to-day?'

I tried to answer, but Maignan had so handled me that I had not breath enough, and stood panting.

'Your Highness's clemency in this matter,' M. de Turenne said, with a sneer, 'has been so great he trusted to its continuance. And doubtless he thought to find you alone. I fear I am in the way.'

I knew him by his figure and his grand air, which in any other company would have marked him for master; and forgetting the impatience which a moment before had consumed me—doubtless I was still light-headed—I answered him. 'Yet I had once the promise of your lordship's protection,' I gasped.

'My protection, sir?' he exclaimed, his eyes gleaming angrily.

'Even so,' I answered. 'At the inn at Etampes, where M. de Crillon would have fought me.'

He was visibly taken aback. 'Are you that man?' he cried.

'I am. But I am not here to prate of myself,' I replied. And with that—the remembrance of my neglected errand flashing on me again—I staggered to the King of Navarre's side, and, falling on my knees, seized his stirrup. 'Sire, I bring you news! great news! dreadful news!' I cried, clinging to it. 'His Majesty was but a quarter of an hour ago stabbed in the body in his chamber by a villain monk. And is dying, or, it may be, dead.'

'Dead? The King!' Turenne cried with an oath. 'Impossible!'

Vaguely I heard others crying, some this, some that, as surprise and consternation, or anger, or incredulity moved them. But I did not answer them, for Henry, remaining silent, held me spellbound and awed by the marvellous change which I saw fall on his face. His eyes became on a sudden suffused with blood, and seemed to retreat under his heavy brows; his cheeks turned of a brick-red colour; his half-open lips showed his teeth gleaming through his beard; while his great nose, which seemed to curve and curve until it well-nigh met his chin, gave to his mobile countenance an aspect as strange as it was terrifying. Withal he uttered for a time no word, though I saw his hand grip the riding-whip he held in a convulsive grasp, as though his thought were ''Tis mine! Mine! Wrest it away who dares!'

'Bethink you, sir,' he said at last, fixing his piercing eyes on me, and speaking in a harsh, low tone, like the growling of a great dog, 'this is no jesting-time. Nor will you save your skin by a ruse. Tell me, on your peril, is this a trick?'

'Heaven forbid, sire!' I answered with passion. 'I was in the chamber, and saw it with my own eyes. I mounted on the instant, and rode hither by the shortest route to warn your Highness to look to yourself. Monks are many, and the Holy Union is not apt to stop half-way.'

I saw he believed me, for his face relaxed. His breath seemed to come and go again, and for the tenth part of a second his eyes sought M. de Rosny's. Then he looked at me again. 'I thank you, sir,' he said, bowing gravely and courteously, 'for your care for me—not for your tidings, which are of the sorriest. God grant my good cousin and king may be hurt only. Now tell us exactly—for these gentlemen are equally interested with myself—had a surgeon seen him?'

I replied in the negative, but added that the wound was in the groin, and bled much.

'You said a few minutes ago, "dying or already dead!"' the King of Navarre rejoined. 'Why?'

'His Majesty's face was sunken,' I stammered.

He nodded. 'You may be mistaken,' he said. 'I pray that you are. But here comes Mornay. He may know more.'

In a moment I was abandoned, even by M. de Turenne, so great was the anxiety which possessed all to learn the truth. Maignan alone, under pretence of adjusting a stirrup, remained beside me, and entreated me in a low voice to begone. 'Take this horse, M. de Marsac, if you will,' he urged, 'and ride back the way you came. You have done what you came to do. Go back, and be thankful.'

'Chut!' I said, 'there is no danger.'

'You will see,' he replied darkly, 'if you stay here. Come, come, take my advice and the horse,' he persisted, 'and begone! Believe me, it will be for the best.'

I laughed outright at his earnestness and his face of perplexity. 'I see you have M. de Rosny's orders to get rid of me,' I said. 'But I am not going, my friend. He must find some other way out of his embarrassment, for here I stay.'

'Well, your blood be on your own head,' Maignan retorted, swinging himself into the saddle with a gloomy face. 'I have done my best to save you!'

'And your master!' I answered, laughing.

For flight was the last thing I had in my mind. I had ridden this ride with a clear perception that the one thing I needed was a footing at Court. By the special kindness of Providence I had now gained this; and I was not the man to resign it because it proved to be scanty and perilous. It was something that I had spoken to the great Vicomte face to face and not been consumed, that I had given him look for look and still survived, that I had put in practice Crillon's lessons and come to no harm.

Nor was this all. I had never in the worst times blamed the King of Navarre for his denial of me. I had been fool-

ish, indeed, seeing that it was in the bargain, had I done so; nor had I ever doubted his good-will or his readiness to reward me should occasion arise. Now, I flattered myself, I had given him that which he needed, and had hitherto lacked—an excuse, I mean, for interference in my behalf.

Whether I was right or wrong in this notion I was soon to learn, for at this moment Henry's cavalcade, which had left me a hundred paces behind, came to a stop, and while some of the number waved to me to come on, one spurred back to summon me to the king. I hastened to obey the order as fast as I could, but I saw on approaching that though all was at a standstill till I came up, neither the King of Navarre nor M. de Turenne was thinking principally of me. Every face, from Henry's to that of his least important courtier, wore an air of grave preoccupation; which I had no difficulty in ascribing to the doubt present in every mind, and outweighing every interest, whether the King of France was dead, or dying, or merely wounded.

'Quick, sir!' Henry said with impatience, as soon as I came within hearing. 'Do not detain me with your affairs longer than is necessary. M. de Turenne presses me to carry into effect the order I gave yesterday. But as you have placed yourself in jeopardy on my account I feel that something is due to you. You will be good enough, therefore, to present yourself at once at M. la Varenne's lodging, and give me your parole to remain there without stirring abroad until your affair is concluded.'

Aware that I owed this respite, which at once secured my present safety and promised well for the future, to the great event that, even in M. de Turenne's mind, had overshadowed all others, I bowed in silence. Henry, however, was not content with this. 'Come, sir,' he said sharply, and with every appearance of anger, 'do you agree to that?'

I replied humbly that I thanked him for his clemency.

'There is no need of thanks,' he replied coldly. 'What I have done is without prejudice to M. de Turenne's complaint. He must have justice.'

I bowed again, and in a moment the troop were gone at a gallop towards Meudon, whence, as I afterwards learned, the King of Navarre, attended by a select body of five-and-twenty horsemen, wearing private arms, rode on at full speed to St. Cloud to present himself at His Majesty's bedside. A groom who had caught the Cid, which had escaped into the town with no other injury than a slight wound in the shoulder, by-and-by met me with the horse; and in this way I was enabled to render myself with some decency at Varenne's lodging, a small house at the foot of the hill, not far from the Castle-gate.

Here I found myself under no greater constraint than that which my own parole laid upon me; and my room having the conveniency of a window looking upon the public street, I was enabled from hour to hour to comprehend and enter into the various alarms and surprises which made that day remarkable. The manifold reports which flew from mouth to mouth on the occasion, as well as the overmastering excitement which seized all, are so well remembered, however, that I forbear to dwell upon them, though they served to distract my mind from my own position. Suffice it that at one moment we heard that His Majesty was dead, at another that the wound was skin deep, and again that we might expect him at Meudon before sunset. The rumour that the Duchess de Montpensier had taken poison was no sooner believed than we were asked to listen to the guns of Paris firing *feux de joie* in honour of the King's death.

The streets were so closely packed with persons telling and hearing these tales that I seemed from my window to be looking on a fair. Nor was all my amusement without-doors; for a number of the gentlemen of the Court, hearing that I had been at St. Cloud in the morning, and in the very chamber, a thing which made me for the moment the most desirable companion in the world, remembered on a sudden that they had a slight acquaintance with me, and honoured me by calling upon me and sitting a great part of

the day with me. From which circumstance I confess I derived as much hope as they diversion; knowing that courtiers are the best weather-prophets in the world, who hate nothing so much as to be discovered in the company of those on whom the sun does not shine.

The return of the King of Navarre, which happened about the middle of the afternoon, while it dissipated the fears of some and dashed the hopes of others, put an end to this state of uncertainty by confirming, to the surprise of many, that His Majesty was in no danger. We learned with varying emotions that the first appearances, which had deceived, not myself only, but experienced leeches, had been themselves belied by subsequent conditions; and that, in a word, Paris had as much to fear, and loyal men as much to hope, as before this wicked and audacious attempt.

I had no more than stomached this surprising information, which was less welcome to me, I confess, than it should have been, when the arrival of M. d'Agen, who greeted me with the affection which he never failed to show me, distracted my thoughts for a time. Immediately on learning where I was and the strange adventures which had befallen me he had ridden off; stopping only once, when he had nearly reached me, for the purpose of waiting on Madame de Bruhl. I asked him how she had received him.

'Like herself,' he replied with an ingenuous blush. 'More kindly than I had a right to expect, if not as warmly as I had the courage to hope.'

'That will come with time,' I said, laughing. 'And Mademoiselle de la Vire?'

'I did not see her,' he answered, 'but I heard she was well. And a hundred fathoms deeper in love,' he added, eyeing me roguishly, 'than when I saw her last.'

It was my turn to colour now, and I did so, feeling all the pleasure and delight such a statement was calculated to afford me. Picturing mademoiselle as I had seen her last, leaning from her horse with love written so plainly on her weeping face that all who ran might read, I sank

into so delicious a reverie that M. la Varenne, entering suddenly, surprised us both before another word passed on either side.

His look and tone were as abrupt as it was in his nature, which was soft and compliant, to make them. 'M. de Marsac,' he said, 'I am sorry to put any constraint upon you, but I am directed to forbid you to your friends. And I must request this gentleman to withdraw.'

'But all day my friends have come in and out,' I said with surprise. 'Is this a new order?'

'A written order, which reached me no farther back than two minutes ago,' he answered plainly. 'I am also directed to remove you to a room at the back of the house, that you may not overlook the street.'

'But my parole was taken,' I cried, with a natural feeling of indignation.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'I am sorry to say that I have nothing to do with that,' he answered. 'I can only obey orders. I must ask this gentleman, therefore, to withdraw.'

Of course M. d'Agen had no option but to leave me; which he did, I could see, notwithstanding his easy and confident expressions, with a good deal of mistrust and apprehension. When he was gone, La Varenne lost no time in carrying out the remainder of his orders. As a consequence I found myself confined to a small and gloomy apartment which looked, at a distance of three paces, upon the smooth face of the rock on which the Castle stood. This change, from a window which commanded all the life of the town, and intercepted every breath of popular fancy, to a closet whither no sounds penetrated, and where the very transition from noon to evening scarcely made itself known, could not fail to depress my spirits sensibly; the more as I took it to be significant of a change in my fortunes fully as grave. Reflecting that I must now appear to the King of Navarre in the light of a bearer of false tidings, I associated the order to confine me more closely with his return from St. Cloud; and comprehending that M. de Turenne was once

more at liberty to attend to my affairs, I began to look about me with forebodings which were none the less painful because the parole I had given debarred me from any attempt to escape.

Sleep and habit enabled me, nevertheless, to pass the night in comfort. Very early in the morning a great firing of guns, which made itself heard even in my quarters, led me to suppose that Paris had surrendered; but the servant who brought me my breakfast declined in a surly fashion to give me any information. In the end, I spent the whole day alone, my thoughts divided between my mistress and my own prospects, which seemed to grow more and more gloomy as the hours succeeded one another. No one came near me, no step broke the silence of the house; and for a while I thought my guardians had forgotten even that I needed food. This omission, it is true, was made good about sunset, but still M. la Varenne did not appear, the servant seemed to be dumb, and I heard no sounds in the house.

I had finished my meal an hour or more, and the room was growing dark, when the silence was at last broken by quick steps passing along the entrance. They paused, and seemed to hesitate at the foot of the stairs, but the next moment they came on again, and stopped at my door. I rose from my seat on hearing the key turned in the lock, and my astonishment may be conceived when I saw no other than M. de Turenne enter, and close the door behind him.

He saluted me in a haughty manner as he advanced to the table, raising his cap for an instant and then replacing it. This done he stood looking at me, and I at him, in a silence which on my side was the result of pure astonishment; on his, of contempt and a kind of wonder. The evening light, which was fast failing, lent a sombre whiteness to his face, causing it to stand out from the shadows behind him in a way which was not without its influence on me.

'Well!' he said at last, speaking slowly and with unimaginable insolence, 'I am here to look at you!'

I felt my anger rise, and gave him back look for look. 'At your will,' I said, shrugging my shoulders.

'And to solve a question,' he continued in the same tone. 'To learn whether the man who was mad enough to insult and defy *me* was the old penniless dullard some called him, or the dare-devil others painted him.'

'You are satisfied now?' I said.

He eyed me for a moment closely; then with sudden heat he cried, 'Curse me if I am! Nor whether I have to do with a man very deep or very shallow, a fool or a knave!'

'You may say what you please to a prisoner,' I retorted coldly.

'Turenne commonly does—to whom he pleases!' he answered. The next moment he made me start by saying, as he drew out a comfit-box and opened it, 'I am just from the little fool you have bewitched. If she were in my power I would have her whipped and put on bread and water till she came to her senses. As she is not, I must take another way. Have you any idea, may I ask,' he continued in his cynical tone, 'what is going to become of you, M. de Marsac?'

I replied, my heart inexpressibly lightened by what he had said of mademoiselle, that I placed the fullest confidence in the justice of the King of Navarre.

He repeated the name in a tone I did not understand.

'Yes, sir, the King of Navarre,' I answered firmly.

'Well, I daresay you have good reason to do so,' he rejoined with a sneer. 'Unless I am mistaken he knew a little more of this affair than he acknowledges.'

'Indeed? The King of Navarre?' I said, staring stolidly at him.

'Yes, indeed, indeed, the King of Navarre!' he retorted, mimicking me, with a nearer approach to anger than I had yet witnessed in him. 'But let him be a moment, sirrah!'

he continued, 'and do you listen to me. Or first look at that. Seeing is believing.'

He drew out as he spoke a paper, or, to speak more correctly, a parchment, which he thrust with a kind of savage scorn into my hand. Repressing for the moment the surprise I felt, I took it to the window, and reading it with difficulty, found it to be a royal patent drawn, as far as I could judge, in due form, and appointing some person unknown—for the name was left blank—to the post of Lieutenant-Governor of the Armagnac, with a salary of twelve thousand livres a year!

'Well, sir?' he said impatiently.

'Well?' I answered mechanically. For my brain reeled; the exhibition of such a paper in such a way raised extraordinary thoughts in my mind.

'Can you read it?' he asked.

'Certainly,' I answered, telling myself that he would fain play a trick on me.

'Very well,' he replied, 'then listen. I am going to condescend; to make you an offer, M. de Marsac. I will procure you your freedom, and fill up the blank, which you see there, with your name—upon one condition.'

I stared at him with all the astonishment it was natural for me to feel in the face of such a proposition. 'You will confer this office on me?' I muttered incredulously.

'The king having placed it at my disposal,' he answered, 'I will. But first let me remind you,' he went on proudly, 'that the affair has another side. On the one hand I offer you such employment, M. de Marsac, as should satisfy your highest ambition. On the other, I warn you that my power to avenge myself is no less to-day than it was yesterday; and that if I condescend to buy you, it is because that course commends itself to me for reasons, not because it is the only one open.'

I bowed. 'The condition, M. le Vicomte?' I said huskily, beginning to understand him.

'That you give up all claim and suit to the hand of my

kinswoman,' he answered lightly. 'That is all. It is a simple and easy condition.'

I looked at him in renewed astonishment, in wonder, in stupefaction; asking myself a hundred questions. Why did he stoop to bargain, who could command? Why did he condescend to treat, who held me at his mercy? Why did he gravely discuss my aspirations, to whom they must seem the rankest presumption? Why?—but I could not follow it. I stood looking at him in silence; in perplexity as great as if he had offered me the Crown of France; in amazement and doubt and suspicion that knew no bounds.

'Well!' he said at last, misreading the emotion which appeared in my face. 'You consent, sir?'

'Never!' I answered firmly.

He started. 'I think I cannot have heard you aright,' he said, speaking slowly and almost courteously. 'I offer you a great place and my patronage, M. de Marsac. Do I understand that you prefer a prison and my enmity?'

'On those conditions,' I answered.

'Think, think!' he said harshly.

'I have thought,' I answered.

'Ay, but have you thought where you are?' he retorted. 'Have you thought how many obstacles lie between you and this little fool? How many persons you must win over, how many friends you must gain? Have you thought what it will be to have me against you in this, or which of us is more likely to win in the end?'

'I have thought,' I rejoined.

But my voice shook, my lips were dry. The room had grown dark. The rock outside, intercepting the light, gave it already the air of a dungeon. Though I did not dream of yielding to him, though I even felt that in this interview he had descended to my level, and I had had the better of him, I felt my heart sink. For I remembered how men immured in prisons drag out their lives always petitioning, always forgotten; how wearily the days go, that to free men are bright with hope and ambition. And I saw in

a flash what it would be to remain here, or in some such place; never to cross horse again, or breathe the free air of heaven, never to hear the clink of sword against stirrup, or the rich tones of M. d'Agen's voice calling for his friend!

I expected M. de Turenne to go when I had made my answer, or else to fall into such a rage as opposition is apt to cause in those who seldom encounter it. To my surprise, however, he restrained himself. 'Come,' he said, with patience which fairly astonished me, and so much the more as chagrin was clearly marked in his voice, 'I know where you put your trust. You think the King of Navarre will protect you. Well, I pledge you the honour of Turenne that he will not; that the King of Navarre will do nothing to save you. Now, what do you say?'

'As I said before,' I answered doggedly.

He took up the parchment from the table with a grim laugh. 'So much the worse for you then!' he said, shrugging his shoulders. 'So much the worse for you! I took you for a rogue! It seems you are a fool!'

CHAPTER XXXVI.

'VIVE LE ROI!'

He took his leave with those words. But his departure, which I should have hailed a few minutes before with joy, as a relief from embarrassment and humiliation, found me indifferent. The statement to which he had solemnly pledged himself in regard to the King of Navarre, that I could expect no further help from him, had prostrated me; dashing my hopes and spirits so completely that I remained rooted to the spot long after his step had ceased to sound on the stairs. If what he said was true, in the gloom which darkened alike my room and my prospects I could descry no glimmer of light. I knew His Majesty's weak-

ness and vacillation too well to repose any confidence in him; if the King of Navarre also abandoned me, I was indeed without hope, as without resource.

I had stood some time with my mind painfully employed upon this problem, which my knowledge of M. de Turenne's strict honour in private matters did not allow me to dismiss lightly, when I heard another step on the stairs, and in a moment M. la Varenne opened the door. Finding me in the dark he muttered an apology for the remissness of the servants; which I accepted, seeing nothing else for it, in good part.

'We have been at sixes-and-sevens all day, and you have been forgotten,' he continued. 'But you will have no reason to complain now. I am ordered to conduct you to His Majesty without delay.'

'To St. Cloud!' I exclaimed, greatly astonished.

'No, the king of France is here,' he answered.

'At Meudon?'

'To be sure. Why not?'

I expressed my wonder at his Majesty's rapid recovery.

'Pooh!' he answered roughly. 'He is as well as he ever was. I will leave you my light. Be good enough to descend as soon as you are ready, for it is ill work keeping kings waiting. Oh! and I had forgotten one thing,' he continued, returning when he had already reached the door. 'My orders are to see that you do not hold converse with anyone until you have seen the king, M. de Marsac. You will kindly remember this if we are kept waiting in the antechamber.'

'Am I to be transported to—other custody?' I asked, my mind full of apprehension.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'Possibly,' he replied. 'I do not know.'

Of course there was nothing for it but to murmur that I was at the king's disposition; after which La Varenne retired, leaving me to put the best face on the matter I could. Naturally I augured anything but well of an inter-

view weighted with such a condition; and this contributed still further to depress my spirits, already lowered by the long solitude in which I had passed the day. Fearing nothing, however, so much as suspense, I hastened to do what I could to repair my costume, and then descended to the foot of the stairs, where I found my custodian awaiting me with a couple of servants, of whom one bore a link.

We went out side by side, and having barely a hundred yards to go, seemed in a moment to be passing through the gate of the Castle. I noticed that the entrance was very strongly guarded, but an instant's reflection served to remind me that this was not surprising after what had happened at St. Cloud. I remarked to M. la Varenne as we crossed the courtyard that I supposed Paris had surrendered; but he replied in the negative so curtly, and with so little consideration, that I forebore to ask any other questions; and the Château being small, we found ourselves almost at once in a long, narrow corridor, which appeared to serve as the antechamber.

It was brilliantly lighted and crowded from end to end, and almost from wall to wall, with a mob of courtiers; whose silence, no less than their keen and anxious looks, took me by surprise. Here and there two or three, who had seized upon the embrasure of a window, talked together in a low tone; or a couple, who thought themselves sufficiently important to pace the narrow passage between the waiting lines, conversed in whispers as they walked. But even these were swift to take alarm, and continually looked askance; while the general company stood at gaze, starting and looking up eagerly whenever the door swung open or a newcomer was announced. The strange silence which prevailed reminded me of nothing so much as of the Court at Blois on the night of the Duke of Mercœur's desertion; but that stillness had brooded over empty chambers, this gave a peculiar air of strangeness to a room thronged in every part.

M. la Varenne, who was received by those about the door with silent politeness, drew me into the recess of a window; whence I was able to remark, among other things, that the Huguenots present almost outnumbered the king's immediate following. Still, among those who were walking up and down, I noticed M. de Rambouillet, to whom at another time I should have hastened to pay my respects; with Marshal d'Aumont, Sancy, and Humières. Nor had I more than noted the presence of these before the door of the chamber opened and added to their number Marshal Biron, who came out leaning on the arm of Crillon. The sight of these old enemies in combination was sufficient of itself to apprise me that some serious crisis was at hand; particularly as their progress through the crowd was watched, I observed, by a hundred curious and attentive eyes.

They disappeared at last through the outer door, and the assemblage turned as with one accord to see who came next. But nearly half an hour elapsed before the Chamber door, which all watched so studiously, again opened. This time it was to give passage to my late visitor, Turenne, who came out smiling, and leaning, to my great surprise, on the arm of M. de Rosny.

As the two walked down the room, greeting here and there an obsequious friend, and followed in their progress by all eyes, I felt my heart sink indeed; both at sight of Turenne's good-humour, and of the company in which I found him. Aware that in proportion as he was pleased I was like to meet with displeasure, I still might have had hope left had I had Rosny left. Losing him, however—and I could not doubt, seeing him as I saw him, that I had lost him—and counting the King of Navarre as gone already, I felt such a failure of courage as I had never known before. I told myself with shame that I was not made for Courts, or for such scenes as these; and recalling with new and keen mortification the poor figure I had cut in the King of Navarre's antechamber at St. Jean, I experienced so strange a gush of pity for my mistress that nothing could exceed

the tenderness I felt for her. I had won her under false colours, I was not worthy of her. I felt that my mere presence in her company in such a place as this, and among these people, must cover her with shame and humiliation.

To my great relief, since I knew my face was on fire, neither of the two, as they walked down the passage, looked my way or seemed conscious of my neighbourhood. At the door they stood a moment talking earnestly, and it seemed as if M. de Rosny would have accompanied the Vicomte farther. The latter would not suffer it, however, but took his leave there; and this with so many polite gestures that my last hope based on M. de Rosny vanished.

Nevertheless, that gentleman was not so wholly changed that on his turning to re-traverse the room I did not see a smile flicker for an instant on his features as the two lines of bowing courtiers opened before him. The next moment his look fell on me, and though his face scarcely altered, he stopped opposite me.

'M. de Marsac is waiting to see His Majesty?' he asked aloud, speaking to M. la Varenne.

My companion remaining silent, I bowed.

'In five minutes,' M. de Rosny replied quietly, yet with a distant air, which made me doubt whether I had not dreamed all I remembered of this man. 'Ah! M. de Paul, what can I do for you?' he continued. And he bent his head to listen to the application which a gentleman who stood next me poured into his ear. 'I will see,' I heard him answer. 'In any case you shall know to-morrow.'

'But you will be my friend?' M. Paul urged, detaining him by the sleeve.

'I will put only one before you,' he answered.

My neighbour seemed to shrink into himself with disappointment. 'Who is it?' he murmured piteously.

'The king and his service, my friend,' M. de Rosny replied drily. And with that he walked away. But half a dozen times at least before he reached the upper end of the room I saw the scene repeated.

I looked on at all this in the utmost astonishment, unable to guess or conceive what had happened to give M. de Rosny so much importance. For it did not escape me that the few words he had stopped to speak to me had invested me with interest in the eyes of all who stood near. They gave me more room and a wider breathing-space, and looking at me askance, muttered my name in whispers. In my uncertainty, however, what this portended I drew no comfort from it; and before I had found time to weigh it thoroughly the door through which Turenne and Rosny had entered opened again. The pages and gentlemen who stood about it hastened to range themselves on either side. An usher carrying a white wand came rapidly down the room, here and there requesting the courtiers to stand back where the passage was narrow. Then a loud voice without cried, 'The King, gentlemen! the King!' and one in every two of us stood a-tiptoe to see him enter.

But there came in only Henry of Navarre, wearing a violet cloak and cap.

I turned to La Varenne and with my head full of confusion, muttered impatiently, 'But the king, man! Where is the king?'

He grinned at me, with his hand before his mouth. 'Hush!' he whispered. ''Twas a jest we played on you! His late Majesty died at daybreak this morning. This is the king.'

'This! the King of Navarre?' I cried; so loudly that some round us called 'Silence!'

'No, the King of France, fool!' he replied. 'Your sword must be sharper than your wits, or I have been told some lies!'

I let the gibe pass and the jest, for my heart was beating so fast and painfully that I could scarcely preserve my outward composure. There was a mist before my eyes, and a darkness which set the lights at defiance. It was in vain I tried to think what this might mean—to me. I could not put two thoughts together, and while I still ques-

tioned what reception I might expect, and who in this new state of things were my friends, the king stopped before me.

'Ha, M. de Marsac!' he cried cheerfully, signing to those who stood before me to give place. 'You are the gentleman who rode so fast to warn me the other morning. I have spoken to M. de Turenne about you, and he is willing to overlook the complaint he had against you. For the rest, go to my closet, my friend. Go! Rosny knows my will respecting you.'

I had sense enough left to kneel and kiss his hand; but it was in silence, which he knew how to interpret. He had moved on and was speaking to another before I recovered the use of my tongue, or the wits which his gracious words had scattered. When I did so, and got on my feet again I found myself the centre of so much observation and the object of so many congratulations that I was glad to act upon the hint which La Varenne gave me, and hurry away to the closet.

Here, though I had now an inkling of what I had to expect, I found myself received with a kindness which bade fair to overwhelm me. Only M. de Rosny was in the room, and he took me by both hands in a manner which told me without a word that the Rosny of old days was back, and that for the embarrassment I had caused him of late I was more than forgiven. When I tried to thank him for the good offices which I knew he had done me with the king he would have none of it; reminding me with a smile that he had eaten of my cheese when the choice lay between that and Lisieux.

'And besides, my friend,' he continued, his eyes twinkling, 'You have made me richer by five hundred crowns.'

'How so?' I asked, wondering more and more.

'I wagered that sum with Turenne that he could not bribe you,' he answered, smiling. 'And see,' he continued, selecting from some on the table the same parchment I had seen before, 'here is the bribe. Take it; it is yours. I

have given a score to-day, but none with the same pleasure. Let me be the first to congratulate the Lieutenant-Governor of the Armagnac.'

For a while I could not believe that he was in earnest; which pleased him mightily, I remember. When I was brought at last to see that the king had meant this for me from the first, and had merely lent the patent to Turenne that the latter might make trial of me, my pleasure and gratification were such that I could no more express them then than I can now describe them. For they knew no bounds. I stood before Rosny silent and confused, with long-forgotten tears welling up to my eyes, and one regret only in my heart—that my dear mother had not lived to see the fond illusions with which I had so often amused her turned to sober fact. Not then, but afterwards, I remarked that the salary of my office amounted to the exact sum which I had been in the habit of naming to her; and I learned that Rosny had himself fixed it on information given him by Mademoiselle de la Vire.

As my transports grew more moderate, and I found voice to thank my benefactor, he had still an answer. 'Do not deceive yourself, my friend,' he said gravely, 'or think this an idle reward. My master is King of France, but he is a king without a kingdom, and a captain without money. To-day, to gain his rights, he has parted with half his powers. Before he win all back there will be blows—blows, my friend. And to that end I have bought your sword.'

I told him that if no other left its scabbard for the king, mine should be drawn.

'I believe you,' he answered kindly, laying his hand on my shoulder. 'Not by reason of your words—Heaven knows I have heard vows enough to-day!—but because I have proved you. And now,' he continued, speaking in an altered tone and looking at me with a queer smile, 'now I suppose you are perfectly satisfied? You have nothing more to wish for, my friend?'

I looked aside in a guilty fashion, not daring to prefer on the top of all his kindness a further petition. Moreover, His Majesty might have other views; or on this point Turenne might have proved obstinate. In a word, there was nothing in what had happened, or on M. de Rosny's communication, to inform me whether the wish of my heart was to be gratified or not.

But I should have known that great man better than to suppose that he was one to promise without performing, or to wound a friend when he could not salve the hurt. After enjoying my confusion for a time he burst into a great shout of laughter, and taking me familiarly by the shoulders, turned me towards the door. 'There, go!' he said. 'Go up the passage. You will find a door on the right, and a door on the left. You will know which to open.'

Forbidding me to utter a syllable, he put me out. In the passage, where I fain would have stood awhile to collect my thoughts, I was affrighted by sounds which warned me that the king was returning that way. Fearing to be surprised by him in such a state of perturbation, I hurried to the end of the passage, where I discovered, as I had been told, two doors.

They were both closed, and there was nothing about either of them to direct my choice. But M. de Rosny was correct in supposing that I had not forgotten the advice he had offered me on the day when he gave me so fine a surprise in his own house—'When you want a good wife, M. de Marsac, turn to the right!' I remembered the words, and without a moment's hesitation—for the king and his suite were already entering the passage—I knocked boldly, and scarcely waiting for an invitation, went in.

Fanchette was by the door, but stood aside with a grim smile, which I was at liberty to accept as a welcome or not. Mademoiselle, who had been seated on the farther side of the table, rose as I entered, and we stood looking at one another. Doubtless she waited for me to speak first; while I on my side was so greatly taken aback by the change

wrought in her by the Court dress she was wearing and the air of dignity with which she wore it, that I stood gasping. I turned coward after all that had passed between us. This was not the girl I had wooed in the greenwoods by St. Gaultier; nor the pale-faced woman I had lifted to the saddle a score of times in the journey Paris-wards. The sense of unworthiness which I had experienced a few minutes before in the crowded antechamber returned in full force in presence of her grace and beauty, and once more I stood tongue-tied before her, as I had stood in the lodgings at Blois. All the later time, all that had passed between us was forgotten.

She, for her part, looked at me wondering at my silence. Her face, which had grown rosy red at my entrance, turned pale again. Her eyes grew large with alarm; she began to beat her foot on the floor in a manner I knew. 'Is anything the matter, sir?' she muttered at last.

'On the contrary, mademoiselle,' I answered hoarsely, looking every way, and grasping at the first thing I could think of, 'I am just from M. de Rosny.'

'And he?'

'He has made me Lieutenant-Governor of the Armagnac.'

She curtseyed to me in a wonderful fashion. 'It pleases me to congratulate you, sir,' she said, in a voice between laughing and crying. 'It is not more than equal to your deserts.'

I tried to thank her becomingly, feeling at the same time more foolish than I had ever felt in my life; for I knew that this was neither what I had come to tell nor she to hear. Yet I could not muster up courage nor find words to go farther, and stood by the table in a state of miserable discomposure.

'Is that all, sir?' she said at last, losing patience.

Certainly it was now or never, and I knew it. I made the effort. 'No, mademoiselle,' I said in a low voice. 'Far from it. But I do not see here the lady to whom I came to address myself, and whom I have seen a hundred

times in far other garb than yours, wet and weary and dishevelled, in danger and in flight. Her I have served and loved; and for her I have lived. I have had no thought for months that has not been hers, nor care save for her. I and all that I have by the king's bounty are hers, and I came to lay them at her feet. But I do not see her here.'

'No, sir?' she answered in a whisper, with her face averted.

'No, mademoiselle.'

With a sudden brightness and quickness which set my heart beating she turned, and looked at me. 'Indeed!' she said. 'I am sorry for that. It is a pity your love should be given elsewhere, M. de Marsac—since it is the king's will that you should marry me.'

'Ah, mademoiselle!' I cried, kneeling before her—for she had come round the table and stood beside me—'But you?'

'It is my will too, sir,' she answered, smiling through her tears.

. . . . . .

On the following day Mademoiselle de la Vire became my wife; the king's retreat from Paris, which was rendered necessary by the desertion of many who were ill-affected to the Huguenots, compelling the instant performance of the marriage, if we would have it read by M. d'Amours. This haste notwithstanding, I was enabled by the kindness of M. d'Agen to make such an appearance, in respect both of servants and equipment, as became rather my future prospects than my past distresses. It is true that His Majesty, out of a desire to do nothing which might offend Turenne, did not honour us with his presence; but Madame Catherine attended on his behalf, and herself gave me my bride. M. de Sully and M. Crillon, with the Marquis de Rambouillet and his nephew, and my distant connection, the Duke de Rohan, who first acknowledged me on that day, were among those who earned my gratitude by attending me upon the occasion.

The marriage of M. François d'Agen with the widow of my old rival and opponent did not take place until something more than a year later, a delay which was less displeasing to me than to the bridegroom, inasmuch as it left madame at liberty to bear my wife company during my absence on the campaign of Arques and Ivry. In the latter battle, which added vastly to the renown of M. de Rosny, who captured the enemy's standard with his own hand, I had the misfortune to be wounded in the second of the two charges led by the king; and being attacked by two foot soldiers, as I lay entangled I must inevitably have perished but for the aid afforded me by Simon Fleix, who flew to the rescue with the courage of a veteran. His action was observed by the king, who begged him from me, and attaching him to his own person in the capacity of clerk, started him so fairly on the road to fortune that he has since risen beyond hope or expectation.

The means by which Henry won for a time the support of Turenne (and incidentally procured his consent to my marriage) are now too notorious to require explanation. Nevertheless, it was not until the Vicomte's union a year later with Mademoiselle de la Marck, who brought him the Duchy of Bouillon, that I thoroughly understood the matter; or the kindness peculiar to the king, my master, which impelled that great monarch, in the arrangement of affairs so vast, to remember the interests of the least of his servants.

THE END.